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Baseball Joe, Home Run King

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AUTHOR OF

"BASEBALL JOE OF THE SILVER STARS," "BASEBALL
JOE IN THE BIG LEAGUE," "THE RIVAL PITCHERS,"
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BASEBALL JOE, HOME RUN KING

CHAPTER I

A DANGEROUS PLUNGE

"I'M going to tie you up in knots, old man," said Jim Barclay, with a smile, as he picked up the ball and stepped into the box in batting practice at the training camp.

"I've heard that kind of talk before," retorted Joe Matson, known all over the country as "Baseball Joe," the king pitcher of the Giants. "But untying knots is the best thing I do. Give me the best you have in the shop."

Jim wound up and put one over that just cut the corner of the plate. Joe made a mighty swing at it, but it was just beyond his reach.

"Nearly broke your back reaching for that one, eh?" laughed Jim, as the ball was thrown back to him.

"I was just kidding you that time," grinned Joe. "I'm going to kill the next one."

Again the ball whizzed to the plate. It was a fast, straight ball with a slight hop to it. Joe caught it near the end of his bat and "leaned on it" heavily. The ball soared out between right and center, and the outfielders covering that position gave one look at it and then turned and ran with the ball. But it kept on and on until it cleared the fence, and the discomfited fielders threw up their hands and came slowly back to their positions.

Jim looked sheepish, and Joe, who was his chum and best friend, laughed outright as he relinquished the bat to the next man in line.

"A sweet home run, Jim," he remarked.

"I should say so!" snorted Jim. "That hit was good for two home runs. The ball was ticketed for kingdom come."

"Who was it said that pitchers couldn't hit?" laughed Mylert, the burly catcher of the Giant team, as he took Joe's place.

"I'll tell the world that some of them can!" exclaimed Jim, as he prepared to try his luck again. "Gee, Joe, if that had happened to me in a regular game, it would have broken my heart."

Two keen-eyed men in uniform had been standing near the side lines, watching intently every move of the players, as they tried out their batting eyes and arms. One was stocky and of medium height, with hair that had begun to grey at the

temples. The other was stout and ruddy, with a twinkle in his eyes that bespoke good nature. Both were veterans of many hard-fought baseball campaigns, and both had played on the Baltimore Orioles when that great organization of stars was the sensation of the baseball world.

"Did you see that hit, Robbie?" asked McRae, the manager of the Giants, of his stout companion.

"Not all of it," replied Robson, the coach of the team. "But I followed it as far as the fence. That was a whale of a wallop. I'll bet the ball's going yet," and the man chuckled gleefully.

"Of course, this was only in practice," mused McRae. "Perhaps Barclay wasn't trying over hard."

"Don't kid yourself, Mac," replied Robson. "Barclay wasn't just lobbing them up. That ball came over like a bullet. It had a hop on it too, but Joe gauged it just right. I tell you that boy is a wonder. If he wasn't a wizard in the box, he'd be a terror at the bat."

"I wish there were two of him, Robbie," said the manager, smiling. "One to cover the mound and the other to use as a pinch hitter or play him in the outfield. That would make a combination hard to beat."

"It was the best day's work you ever did when you got that lad from St. Louis," remarked Robson. "I'll bet the Cardinal's manager feels like

throwing a fit every time he thinks what a fool he was to let him go."

"Well," said McRae, "if everybody's foresight in baseball was as good as his hindsight, there'd be no trading done. I don't mind saying that I throw out my chest a little for having seen what was in the kid. He's certainly been the making of the team."

"One thing is certain; and that is that you wouldn't have the World's Championship tucked away if it hadn't been for his great work in the Series," rejoined Robson. "He just had those Chicago birds eating out of his hand."

"Right you are," admitted McRae. "Here's hoping he'll repeat this season."

"Don't worry a bit about that," was Robson's confident answer. "You can see for yourself that he's been going great guns in practice. And even at that he hasn't been letting himself out. He's taking good care of that old soup-bone of his."

"He was never better in his life," declared McRae. "I'll admit that I was a little worried for fear that the trip around the world had taken something out of him. You know what a strain he was under in that All-Star League affair, Robbie. But it hasn't seemed to affect him at all."

"He'll need all he's got this year," said Robbie thoughtfully. "We'll have to depend more on the pitching than we did last year, because we're not so

strong on the batting end. When Burkett quit, it took away a good deal of our hitting strength, and you've seen that Mylert is slipping. On the form he's shown in practice this spring, he won't be good for more than a two hundred and fifty per cent average, and that's about sixty points below what he showed last year."

"I know it," agreed the manager, a worried look coming into his face. "And what makes it worse is that Larry, too, is slow in rounding into form. Instead of lining them out, he's sending them up in the air. He'll be just pie for the fielders if he keeps it up. I can't understand the thing at all."

"Oh, well," said Robbie, whose jolly disposition never let him stay long under a cloud, "here's hoping that they'll come to the scratch when the season opens. Some of the rookies look pretty good to me, and if the old-timers fall down we may be able to fill their places all right. Come along, Mac; let's finish working out that schedule for the trip north. We'll have to get a hustle on to be in shape to start to-morrow."

McRae gave the signal to his men that practice time was over, and the young athletes, nothing loth to drop their work and get down to the hotel for dinner, began to gather up their bats preparatory to jumping into the bus which was waiting outside the grounds. But before they got to it, McRae and

Robson had climbed in and given the signal to the driver to start.

“No, you don’t!” he called out with a grin, as the bus started away. “You fellows leg it down to the hotel. It’s only two miles, and you need the exercise. Get a move on, or Robbie and I will clear the table before you get there.”

There were grunts and groans from the players, for the sun was warm and the practice had been strenuous. But there was no help for it, and they dropped into a dog trot that was quickened by the thought of the dinner that was waiting for them at the end of the journey.

They reached the hotel in good time, took a shower bath, changed into their regular clothes, and were soon at the table with an appetite that swept the board and made the colored waiters roll their eyes in wonder, not unmixed with awe.

After the meal was finished, Joe and Jim were on their way to the room they shared together when they passed McRae and Robbie, who were sitting in the lobby enjoying their after-dinner cigars.

McRae beckoned to them, and they went over to where the pair was sitting.

“Well, boys,” said the manager, as he motioned to a couple of chairs into which they dropped, “our spring practice is over and I don’t mind saying that I’m feeling good over the way you fellows

ate up your work. Both of you look as fit as fiddles."

"That's sure the way we feel," answered Joe, and Jim murmured acquiescence.

"In fact you look so good," went on McRae, knocking the ashes from his cigar and settling back comfortably in his chair, "that I'm going to call training finished, as far as you two are concerned. Just now you're right at the top of your form, and I don't want to take any chances on your going stale. So I'm going to let you rest up for the next week or ten days. All you have to do is to take good care of yourselves—and I know you boys well enough to be sure you'll do that—and turn up in shape when the season opens week after next."

Joe and Jim looked at each other, and the same thought was in the mind of each. This seemed too good to be true!

"We start north to-morrow," went on McRae, "in two lots, playing minor league teams on the way to keep in practice. The regulars will go along with me, while Robbie will take the second string men and the rookies. We'll jog along in easy fashion and hope to reach the Polo Grounds in the pink of condition."

By this time Joe had found his voice. He smiled broadly.

"That's mighty good of you, Mac," he said, "I

suppose you want us then to go right through to New York."

"That's the idea," replied the manager. "Robbie will see to your transportation this afternoon."

But just here, Robson, who had been watching the boys' faces, broke into a laugh.

"For the love of Mike, wake up Mac!" he adjured his friend. "Don't you know that Joe lives only a couple of hundred miles from here right over the border? And don't you remember those two pretty girls that were with us on the World Tour? And didn't we hear Joe telling Jim a few days ago that his sweetheart was visiting his folks? And here you are sending the lads straight through to New York with never a stop on the way. Mac, old man, I'm ashamed of you."

McRae grinned as he looked at the faces of the young men—faces that had grown suddenly red.

"Robbie hit the nail on the head, did he?" he said, with a chuckle. "Well, I'm Irishman enough to have a soft spot in my heart for the lads and their colleens. Fix it up, boys, to suit yourselves. As long as you report on time, that's all I ask. Get along with you now, as Robbie and I have got to fix up our routes."

Joe and Jim were only too glad to "get along," and after thanking McRae hurried to their room, where they indulged in a wild war dance.

"Glory, hallelujah!" shouted Joe. "A whole

week or more to ourselves, and home only two hundred miles away!"

"Your home is," replied Jim. "Mine's more than a thousand miles away."

"You old sardine!" cried Joe, throwing a book at his head. "Isn't my home yours? Do you think I'd dare show my face there without bringing you along? Clara would never forgive me. Neither would Mabel. Neither would Momsey nor Dad. Get a wiggle on now, old man, and hunt up a time-table."

Jim, with his face jubilant at the thought of soon seeing Joe's pretty sister, hustled about for the time-table; and with heads close together the young men were soon poring over the schedules. At last Joe straightened up with a vexed exclamation.

"Of all the roundabout ways!" he ejaculated. "We'll have to change three or four different times with all sorts of bad connections, and can't reach Riverside until to-morrow afternoon."

"Wait a minute," said Jim, running his pencil along a column. "Here's a line that will get us to Martinsville early to-morrow morning, just before daylight. How far is Martinsville from Riverside?"

"About fifty miles more or less," replied Joe. "But crickey, Jim, that gives me an idea! What's the matter with going to Martinsville and hiring

an auto there? I know Hank Bixby who keeps a garage there and has autos for hire. He used to live in Riverside, and played with me on the old school nine before his folks moved away. I'll send him a wire telling him what time we'll get there and asking him to have a first-class car ready for us."

"You know the road all right, do you?" asked Jim. "Remember it will be dark when we get there."

"I know it like a book," replied Joe. "I've been over it many a time. I could travel it in the dark. It's as level as a table until you get to Hebron. Just beyond that there's a steep hill that will give the car something to do. But Hank will give me a machine that can climb it, and, besides, it will be just about daylight by the time we get there. It's a cinch that we won't have any trouble. I'll bet a hat—what's the matter, Jim?"

For Jim had risen and moved quickly toward the door, which had been standing partly open. He put out his head and looked down the corridor. Not satisfied with that, he went down the hall to the head of the stairs. Then he slowly retraced his steps.

Joe, who had followed his chum to the door, looked at him with open-mouthed wonder.

"What's the matter with you?" he queried. "Have you gone daffy?"

"Not exactly," replied Jim. "I thought I saw somebody I knew go past the door."

"Likely enough," said Joe, with a touch of sarcasm. "It wouldn't be at all surprising. The hotel is full of our fellows."

"It wasn't one of our boys," returned Jim slowly.

"Well, who was it then?" asked Joe, a little impatiently. "Come out of your trance, old man."

"I think it was a fellow we know only too well," Jim replied. "I think it was Braxton."

"Braxton!" exclaimed Joe with sudden interest. "The fellow that was with us on the World Tour?"

"The same one," affirmed Jim. "The fellow you licked within an inch of his life in the old Irish castle."

"Are you sure?" asked Joe. "It doesn't seem at all likely that we'd run across that rascal in this little training-camp town. What on earth would he be doing down here?"

"That's just what I want to know," replied Jim soberly. "As you say, it's all against the chances that we should run across him here by accident. If he's here, he's come with some purpose. And that purpose means nothing good for you. He's exactly the sort of man that won't forget that thrashing."

"I guess he won't," replied Joe grimly. "My

knuckles ache now when I think of it. But if he's looking for another licking, he sure can have it."

"He isn't looking for another," Jim returned. "He's looking to get even for the first one you gave him. You know he swore at the time that he'd pay you up for it."

"He's welcome to try," declared Joe indifferently. "But really, Jim, I think you're mistaken. It seems too improbable. There are plenty of men in the world who look like Braxton."

"Of course, I wouldn't swear it was he," admitted Jim. "I only saw him side-face, and he slipped past the door like a ghost."

"Well, we'll keep our eyes open about the hotel and around the town," rejoined Joe. "But now let's think of pleasanter things. Our train goes at six, and we've got lots to do in getting our duds packed. Then, too, I've got to wire to Hank and must get the tickets for as far as the cars will carry us."

The afternoon proved a busy one, but by train time they had completed their packing, said good-bye to the rest of the team, who frankly envied them their luck, and were snugly ensconced in the day coach, as the little road had no sleeping cars, and even if they had the frequent changes they had to make would have made a sleeper not worth while. As it was, they slept in snatches, had luck

in their connections, and about an hour before dawn stepped off the train at the little station of Martinsville.

Both Baseball Joe and Jim Barclay had expected to find the town asleep, but were surprised to find a large number of the inhabitants, chiefly the younger men, at the station. Still another group stood in the lighted doorway of Hank Bixby's garage, which was directly across the street.

"What's the big idea?" Jim asked Joe, as he looked in surprise at the crowd that drew close about them.

"Blest if I know," replied Joe. "Maybe there's been a fire or something."

But they were soon enlightened, as Hank came bustling across the street, his face aglow with welcome and self-importance.

"Howdy, Mr. Matson!" he exclaimed, as he wrung Joe's hand.

"Mr. Matson!" laughed Joe, returning the handshake. "Where do you get that stuff? What's the matter with Joe?"

"Well, Joe, then," beamed Hank. "You see, Joe, you've got to be such a big fellow now, known all over the United States, that I felt a bit shy about calling you by your first name. I got your wire and mentioned it to a fellow or two, and by heck it was all over town in no time that the greatest pitcher in the country was going to be here.

This crowd's been waiting here all night to say howdy to you."

The people were all crowding around him by now, waiting their turn to shake hands, and Joe, although embarrassed, as he always was when he found himself the center of attention, did his best to respond to the expressions of good will and admiration that were showered upon him. Jim also came in for his share of the crowd's interest as a promising and rapidly rising pitcher of the baseball champions of the world. It was with a sigh of relief that they settled themselves at last in the speedy car which Hank had provided for them and which he proudly assured them would "just burn up the road" between Martinsville and Riverside.

Joe took the wheel and the car started off, amid a waving of hands and a roar of farewell from the crowd.

"Great day for Martinsville," said Jim mischievously, as he settled down by the side of his chum and the car purred along over the level road. "How does it feel to be a hero, Joe?"

"Quit your kidding," replied Joe, with a grin. "If they'd wrung this old wing of mine much more, McRae would have been minus one of his pitchers."

"One of the penalties of greatness," chaffed Jim.

“And now for home!” exulted Joe, as he put on added speed and the car leaped forward.

“And Clara,” murmured Jim under his breath, as he thought of Joe’s charming sister.

Joe did not hear him, for his thoughts were engrossed with Mabel, the girl who had promised to marry him and who he fondly hoped might be at this moment dreaming of him, as without her knowledge he was speeding toward her. She had been visiting at his father’s home as the guest of his sister Clara. Since their trip together around the world the two girls had become almost inseparable, and Mr. and Mrs. Matson already regarded Mabel as a second daughter.

The day for the marriage of Joe and Mabel had not yet been set, but Joe was determined that it should take place soon, and he hoped that now he would be able to get Mabel to set a definite date for that happy event.

Jim, too, had his dreams, and they all centered about Clara. He had fallen desperately in love with her at their first meeting, and he had made up his mind that on this visit he would ask the all-important question, on the answer to which his happiness depended.

The car dashed along at rapid speed, and as they came near Hebron Joe roused himself from his reverie. The darkness was disappearing, and in the faint light of the spring morning they could

see a steep hill a little way ahead. At the side of the road ran a little river, of whose murmur they had been conscious for some time, although in the darkness they could scarcely see it.

“Here’s where we’ll see whether Hank was bragging overmuch about this car,” remarked Joe, as he tightened his grasp on the wheel and put his foot on the accelerator. “I’ll give her a good start and see how she can climb.”

The car gathered speed as it neared the bottom of the hill. Joe peered forward, and then from his lips came a startled shout.

Directly in front of them, completely blocking the road, was a mass of heavy timbers. To strike them at that speed meant maiming or death!

At one side of the road was a steep cliff. On the other side was the river.

Joe’s brain worked like lightning. There was but one chance. He swung the wheel around, the car crashed through a fence at the side of the road, suddenly stopped short, and Joe and Jim were sent headlong into the river!

CHAPTER II

A SURPRISE

THE water was icy and deep, and at this point the current was swift. The force with which the luckless occupants of the car had been propelled sent them far beneath the surface and some distance out into the stream.

A moment later their heads appeared above the water, and they struck out for the shore. Both were strong swimmers, and in a few strokes they reached the bank. Fortunately they had escaped striking any part of the car in their wild hurtling through space, and apart from the chill and wetting were unharmed.

From the mud at the river's edge, they dragged their dripping feet to the solid ground of the road. Then they stood still and looked at each other. The shock and suddenness of it all still affected them, but as they continued to look at the comical figure that each presented, with hair plastered over their faces and clothes clinging to their bodies, their sense of the ludicrous got the better of them and they burst into laughter.

"Talk about scarecrows!" gurgled Jim, as he dragged a wet handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face in a vain attempt to dry it.

"None of them have anything on us," admitted Joe, as he threw off his coat and wrung one dripping trousers leg after the other.

"If only the team could get a snapshot of us now, they'd kid us for the rest of our natural lives," remarked Jim.

"You said it," agreed Joe. "But now," he added more soberly, "just let's take a look at what it was that so nearly killed us or crippled us for life."

They made their way to the mass of timber in the road. At first Jim thought that it might have fallen off some wagon, unknown to the driver. But a closer examination showed that this was an error. The timbers were piled in a way that could have been done only by human hands, and what made this certain was the fact that rocks had been placed on either side to prevent the logs from slipping. It was a formidable barrier, and if the car had dashed into it at the rate it was going, the occupants would almost certainly have been killed.

"Whoever put those timbers there meant harm," said Joe solemnly, when the examination had been completed.

"It looks that way," agreed Jim. "Whoever did it was a scoundrel who ought to be in jail."

"It might have been the work of a crazy man," suggested Joe.

"As crazy as a fox," rejoined Jim, looking squarely into his chum's eyes.

"What do you mean?" asked Joe, in some perplexity.

"I mean," said Jim, carefully weighing every word, "that the man who put that mass of timber there was just as sane as you or I. I mean that he intended that some one should be seriously hurt. I'll go even further. That man meant to injure Joe Matson, whom he hated with a deadly hatred."

"You mean that Braxton did it?" cried Joe.

"I mean that Braxton did it," replied Jim quietly.

They stared at each other with strange emotions stirring in their hearts. And while they stand there, as if turned to stone, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not read the earlier volumes of this series, to trace the fortunes of Baseball Joe up to the time that this story opens.

Joe Matson was born in a little inland village of the Middle West, and grew up in a pleasant home amid wholesome surroundings. His first experience in the great national game, where he was destined to become famous as the greatest pitcher of his time, was gained on the simple diamond of his home town, and his natural aptitude was such that

he soon became known as a rising player all over the county. What obstacles he met and surmounted at that time are related in the first volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe of the Silver Stars."

Some time later, when playing on his school nine, he had considerable trouble with a bully who tried to down him, but found out, as so many trouble makers did later on in life, that Joe Matson was not easily downed. He put into his playing all that experience, combined with his native ability, could teach him, and he served an apprenticeship that stood him in good stead when later he went to Yale. The trials and triumphs of his school experience are told in the second volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe on the School Nine."

With the natural buoyancy of youth, Joe had hoped when he entered Yale that he would have a chance to show his mettle in the box in some of the great annual games that Yale played with Harvard and Princeton. There were many rivals, however, for the honor, including those who had already won their spurs in actual contests. But Joe's light was not made to shine under a bushel, and one day when the cohorts of Princeton came down in their orange and black prepared to "tie the can" to the Bulldog's tail, Joe got his chance and sent a very bedraggled Tiger back to his lair

in Princeton. How Joe won gloriously is told in the third volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe at Yale."

Though he enjoyed his college days at Yale, stood high in his studies, and was popular with his mates, he felt that he was not cut out for one of the learned professions. His mother had hoped that he would be a clergyman and had been urgent in having him adopt that profession. But Joe, though he respected the noble aims of that calling, was not drawn to it. It was the open air life that he craved and for which he was fitted, and the scholastic calm of a study had little attraction for him. He felt that he had it in him to win supremacy in athletic fields.

His mother, of course, was greatly disappointed when she learned how he felt, but she was too wise to insist on her plan when she realized that it was contrary to his special gifts. She knew very little about baseball, but she had the impression that it was no place for an educated man. The fact, however, that so many college men were entering the ranks of professional baseball was made the most of by Joe, and she finally yielded to his wishes.

His chance was not long in coming, for he was soon picked up by one of the scouts who are always looking for "diamonds in the rough," and was offered a contract with the Pittston team of the

Central League. The League was a minor one, but Joe had already learned that a man who proved that he had the makings of a star in him would soon have an opportunity with one of the majors. How speedily his ability was proved and recognized is narrated in the fourth volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe in the Central League."

From the bushes to the National League was a big jump, but Joe made it when he was drafted into the ranks of the St. Louis Cardinals. The team was in the second division when Joe came into action, and was altogether out of the running for the championship. But Joe's twirling was just what it needed to put new heart and life into it, and before the season ended it had climbed into the first division and if the race had been a little longer might have made a big stroke for the pennant. The story of the team's climb, with all its exciting episodes, is told in the fifth volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe in the Big League."

McRae, the crafty and resourceful manager of the New York Giants, had had his eye on Joe all the season, and when the race was ended he made an offer for him that the St. Louis management could not refuse. Now, indeed, Joe felt that the ambition of his life was in a fair way to be realized. McRae had intended to bring him along slowly, so that he could be thoroughly seasoned,

but circumstances put on him the heft of the pitching, and how fully he justified his manager's confidence is narrated in the sixth volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe on the Giants."

After the winning of the National League Championship by the Giants, came the World Series with the Boston Red Sox, who had won the title that year in the American League. The Sox were a hard team to beat, and the Giants had their work cut out for them. In addition to the strain of the games in which he was slated to pitch, Joe had to contend with the foul tactics of a gang of gamblers who had wagered heavily on the Sox and did all they could to put Joe out of action. But his indomitable will and quick wit triumphed over all obstacles, and his magnificent pitching in the last game of the series won the World's Championship for the Giants. The story of that stirring fight is told in the seventh volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe in the World Series."

During these experiences, Joe had not escaped the toils of Cupid. Mabel Varley, a charming young girl, had been rescued by Joe at the moment that a runaway horse was about to carry her over a cliff. The romantic acquaintanceship thus begun soon grew into a deep affection, and Joe knew that Mabel held the happiness of his life in her hands. Jim Barclay, also, a promising young Princeton man and second string pitcher for the Giants, who

was Joe's special chum, had grown very fond of Clara, Joe's pretty sister, and hoped that some day she would promise to be his wife.

The World Series had scarcely ended before Joe and Jim were invited by McRae to make a trip around the world with the Giant and All-American teams. They were eager for the chance, and their delight was increased when it developed that there were to be a number of wives of the players in the party so that Mabel and Clara could go along.

The teams played in Japan, in China, and in many of the cities of Europe, and the experience would have been a thoroughly happy one for Joe, had it not been for the machinations of men who were trying to form a rival league and had by the meanest trickery secured Joe's signature to what afterward turned out to be a contract. How Joe finally unmasked the plotters and had the satisfaction of giving the ringleader a tremendous thrashing is narrated in the preceding volume of the series, entitled: "Baseball Joe Around the World."

And now to return to Joe and Jim, as they stood in their dripping clothes on the country road in the growing light of the spring morning.

For some seconds after Jim's startling statement, Joe stood as though rooted to the spot. Then he pulled himself together.

"Come now, Jim, isn't that pretty far-fetched?" he said, with a forced laugh, in which, however, there was little mirth. "You haven't a shred of proof of anything of the kind."

"No," admitted Jim, "there isn't anything—yet—that would convince a judge or a jury. I'll agree that it wouldn't go far in a court of law. But just put two and two together. Yesterday afternoon we were talking about this trip. You distinctly mentioned the hill near Hebron. It was just after you spoke that I saw Braxton pass the door."

"Thought you saw," corrected Joe.

"All right, then," said Jim patiently, "let it go at that—thought I saw Braxton passing the door. Now just suppose for a minute that I was right and see what comes of it. The man who hates you worse, probably, than any man on earth—the man to whom you gave a terrible thrashing—knew that you would be driving a car just before daylight—knew that you would have to climb a hill—knew that as you got near it you'd probably put on speed to carry the car up—knew that an obstacle put near the bottom of the hill would almost certainly wreck the car and hurt the driver. Knowing all his, might not such a man as we know Braxton to be see his chance and take it?"

There was silence for a moment. Then:

"It certainly sounds strong the way you put it,"

Joe said thoughtfully. "But how on earth could Braxton get here in time to do all this? Think of the distance."

"It isn't so great a distance," rejoined Jim. "That is, if a man came straight across country in a speedy car for instance. It seemed long to us because of the roundabout way we had to go by train. Then too that was early in the afternoon, and Braxton could have had four hours' start of us. He's a rich man and probably has a fast car. He could have made it all right and got here hours ago."

"Yes, but even then," argued Joe, "he couldn't have done it all alone. It's as much as you and I can do together to handle these timbers."

"That's true," conceded Jim. "But he may have had one or more confederates with him. Money you know can do almost anything. I shouldn't wonder if that fellow Fleming helped him. He owed you a debt too, you remember, and the pair were as thick as thieves on the world tour."

"Well, it may be just as you say," replied Joe. "But I hate to think that any man hates me so badly as to try to injure me in such a cowardly way as that. At any rate, it won't do any harm for us to keep our eyes open in the future. But we've got plenty of time to think of that. Now let's get busy and hustle these timbers over to the side of

the road so that nobody else can run into them. Then we'll take a look at the car."

They set to work with a will, and in a few minutes had removed the obstacles from the road.

"Now for the machine," said Joe, as he led the way to the river bank. "I've got an idea that what we owe Hank will put a dent in our bank rolls."

To their delight they found, however, that, apart from superficial injuries, the car seemed to be intact. The wind shield had been shattered and the mud guards were badly bent. But the axles seemed to be sound, the wheels were in place, and as far as they could judge there had been no injury to the engine. To all appearances the expenditure of a hundred dollars would put the car in good shape again.

But the wheels were so firmly imbedded in the mud of the shore that despite all their efforts they could not budge the car. They strained and pushed and lifted, but to no avail. Joe climbed into the driver's seat and set the engine going, but the car was stubborn and refused to back.

"Swell chance of our getting home in time for breakfast," grumbled Joe, as he stopped to rest for a moment.

"Lucky if we get there in time for supper," muttered Jim. "We'll have to go somewhere and

borrow a shovel so that we can dig the wheels out of the mud."

But just at this moment they heard the rumbling of a cart, and running to the road they saw it coming, drawn by two stout horses, while the driver sat handling the reins in leisurely fashion.

They waved their hands and the cart came to a halt, the driver scanning curiously the two young men who had appeared so unexpectedly from the side of the road. He was a bluff, jovial person, and his eyes twinkled with amusement as he noted the wet garments that were clinging to their limbs.

"Been taking a bath with all your clothes on?" he asked, as he got down from his seat.

"Something like that," replied Joe, with a laugh, "but the bath came as a sort of surprise party. The road was blocked, and it was either the morgue or the river for us, so we chose the river."

"Road blocked?" repeated the newcomer, looking about with a puzzled expression. "I don't get you. Looks clear enough to me."

"It wouldn't if you'd been here half an hour ago," replied Joe, and then, as the man listened with interest that soon changed to indignation, he recounted briefly the events of the morning.

"Whoever did that ought to be jailed," he burst out, when the boys had concluded their story. "And he can't be very far away, either. This

road was clear when I passed over it last night. Jump in and I'll drive you into town and we can send out an alarm."

"Not much use of that I'm afraid," replied Joe. "The man or men may be fifty miles away by this time. But if you'll give us a hand to get this auto out of the mud, you'll do us a big favor."

"Sure I'll help you," said the friend in need, whose name they learned was Thompson. "I've got a spade right here in the cart. We'll dig around the wheels a little. Then I'll hitch a trace chain to the machine and my horses will yank it out in a jiffy."

A few minutes of work sufficed to clear the wheels. Then boards were placed behind them, the chain was attached to the rear axle, and the horses drew the car back into the road.

It presented rather a forlorn appearance, but the boys cared little for that. What they were far more concerned about was their own bedraggled condition.

"We match the car all right," remarked Jim disgustedly, as he looked at his own clothes and those of his companion.

"It will never do to let Mabel and Clara see us like this," responded Joe lugubriously.

"Don't let that worry you," laughed their new friend. "Just drive into town and stop at Eph Allen's tailor shop. It's pretty early, but Eph

sleeps in the back of his shop and he'll let you in and fix you up in no time."

This was evidently the best thing to be done, and the young men, after repeated thanks to their newly made friend and with fullest directions as to how to find the tailor shop in question, jumped into the auto and started on the way back to Hebron.

"Old bus seems to work as well as ever," commented Joe, as the car moved on without any visible evidence of injury.

"That's one bit of good luck," replied Jim. "And it's certainly coming to us to make up in part for the bad."

They thanked their stars that it was too early yet for many people to be stirring in the town, and were relieved when they found themselves in front of Allen's shop. Eph must have been a pretty sound sleeper, for it took a good deal of knocking to wake him up, and when at last he thrust his tousled head through the door to ask what was wanted, he was not in the best of temper. But as soon as he learned the circumstances that had occasioned the early call, he became at once all interest and attention, and hustled about to put their clothes in presentable shape.

It was a fairly good job that he at length turned out after he had ironed and pressed their suits, though they had by no means the Beau Brummel

effect with which the boys had planned to impress the girls.

By this time the sun had fully risen and Joe looked at his watch.

"Perhaps we'll be in time to catch them at breakfast yet," he remarked. "It's only about twenty miles from here to Riverside. Maybe they won't be surprised when we break in on them. They don't think we're within several hundred miles of them."

"Perhaps we ought to have telegraphed that we were coming," said Jim.

"It might have been just as well, I suppose," admitted Joe. "But that would have taken away the fun of the surprise. I want to see the look on their faces."

"Of course we won't say anything about what happened to us this morning," suggested Jim, as the machine bowled along over a road that with every minute that passed was growing more familiar.

"Not on your life," replied Joe earnestly. "None of them would ever have another easy minute. They'd be seeing our mangled remains every night in their dreams. All we'll tell them is that we had a little spill and got wet. But not a word about the blocked road or what we suspect regarding Braxton."

Before long they were passing the straggling

houses that marked the outskirts of Riverside. Joe pulled his cap down over his eyes so that he would not be recognized and stopped by any of the people of the town, where he was regarded as something of an idol. All he wanted to do was to get to his family and Mabel, or, as perhaps he would have put it, get to Mabel and his family.

His ruse was successful, for there was no sign of recognition from the few he passed on the streets, and in a few minutes he brought the car to a stop in front of the Matson home.

The young men jumped out, and with Joe leading the way ran lightly up the steps. He tried the front door and found that it yielded to his touch. With his finger on his lips as a warning to Jim, he tiptoed softly through the hall to the door of the dining room.

The odor of coffee and bacon came to them and from the click of plates and cups, as well as the murmur of several voices, they knew that the family was still at the breakfast table.

Joe waited no longer but threw open the door.

"Hello, folks!" he cried.



THERE WAS NO DOUBT OF THE WARMTH OF THAT WELCOME.
"Baseball Joe, Home Run King."

CHAPTER III

REGGIE TURNS UP

IF Joe had counted upon producing a surprise, his success surpassed his wildest expectations.

At first there was a second of paralyzed silence. Then there was a wild hubbub of delighted cries, as four figures started up from the table and launched themselves upon the stalwart figure that stood framed in the doorway.

“Joe!” “Mabel!” “Clara!” “Momsey!” “Dad!” “Jim!” The names were repeated in quick succession and were punctuated with hugs and kisses.

In a moment Joe had his right arm around Mabel, his left about his mother, while Clara had thrown her arms about his neck and his father was attempting to get hold of one of his hands. There was no doubt of the warmth of that welcome.

Nor was Jim left out in the cold. Joe naturally had the center of the stage, but after the first rapturous greeting had passed, they all made Jim feel how delighted they were that he had come

along with Joe. In Clara's eyes especially there was a look that Jim hoped he read aright. Her flushed and sparkling face was alive with happiness that might not be due altogether to the return of her brother, dearly as she loved him.

For a few minutes questions and answers followed close on each other's heels, and it was Mrs. Matson at last who suggested that probably the boys were hungry. They agreed with her emphatically that they were. The girls flew about, and in a short time fresh coffee and hot biscuits and bacon and eggs were set before them in tempting profusion. Then while they ate like famished wolves, the others, who had been just finishing breakfast when they burst in upon them, sat about the table and talked and laughed and beamed to their hearts' content. Perhaps in all the broad land there was no happier group than was gathered about that table in the little town of Riverside.

"You ought to have telegraphed that you were coming, Joe," said Mrs. Matson. "Then we could have had a good breakfast ready for you."

"What do you call this?" laughed Joe, as he helped himself to another biscuit, watching at the same time the bewitching way in which Mabel was pouring him another cup of coffee. "There couldn't be anything better than this this side of kingdom come."

"You're right there, old man," observed Jim, his own appetite keeping pace with that of his chum.

"Seems to me, Joe, that your clothes look a little seedy this morning," Clara remarked, with a sister's frankness, during a moment's pause in the conversation. "The last time you came home you looked like a fashion plate. But now your shirt front is wrinkled, your collar is wilted, and the colors in your necktie have run together. Looks as though you'd got wet through and hadn't dried out yet."

"Perhaps they've been in the river," laughed Mabel gaily, little thinking how near she came to hitting the nail on the head.

Mrs. Matson's motherly heart was quick to take alarm.

"What's that?" she asked. "Nothing really has happened to you, has it, Joe?" she inquired, looking anxiously at her son, who after one glare at the sister who had precipitated the topic, was trying to assume an air of nonchalance.

But this direct inquiry from his mother left him no recourse except to tell her a part of the truth, though not necessarily the whole truth.

"We did have a little spill this morning," he returned indifferently. "I turned the car a little too much to the right and we went through a fence and into a little stream at the side of the road.

Jim and I got wet, but after we got over being mad we had a good laugh over it. Neither one of us was a bit hurt, and it's only our clothes that got the worst of it."

"Oh, but you might have been killed!" exclaimed Mrs. Matson, clasping her hands together nervously. "You must be more careful, Joe. It would break my heart if anything happened to you."

"Don't worry a bit, Momsey," replied Joe, placing his hand affectionately over hers. "Only the good die young, you know, and that makes me safe."

They all pressed him for the details of the accident, and he and Jim both made light of it, making a joke out of their plight and their visit to the tailor, so that apprehension vanished, and after a while the matter was dropped.

Joe was eager for a chance to get alone with Mabel, and Jim was quite as keen for a tête-à-tête with Clara. The girls were quite as eager, but as there was no servant in the simple little household the girls flew around to clear the table, while Joe had a chance for a quiet talk with his mother, and Jim beguiled his impatience by going out on the porch with Mr. Matson for a smoke before the latter had to go downtown to business.

"How have you been feeling, Momsey?" Joe asked when they had settled down in a cosy corner

of the living room. "It seems to me that you're a little thinner than you were."

"I'm not feeling any too well," replied Mrs. Matson. "I have trouble with my breathing whenever I go up or down stairs. But I'll be all right pretty soon," she added, with an attempt at brightness.

"I'm afraid you've been working too hard, Momsey," replied Joe, patting her hand. "Why don't you let me get you a maid to help out with the work? The money doesn't matter, and you know how glad I'd be to bear the expense."

"I don't want any regular servant, Joe," replied Mrs. Matson. "I haven't been used to one, and she'd be more bother than help. We have a wash woman. There isn't much to be done in this little house, and Clara is the dearest girl. If I did what she wanted, I'd just fold my hands and sit around in the living room. And Mabel, too, has spoiled me since she's been here. She's already like a second daughter to me."

"She'll be really your daughter before long, if I have anything to say about it," replied Joe. "I'm going to put it right up to her to marry me while I'm here this time."

Mrs. Matson was both delighted and flustered at the boldness of this announcement.

"You take my breath away, talking like that," she replied, "But I'm afraid Mabel won't let her-

self be carried off her feet in that way. A girl wants to get her trousseau ready. And then, too, she'll want to be married in her father's house. You're a dear boy, Joe, but you've got a lot to learn about women."

"Mabel will agree all right," replied Joe confidently, though his masculine assurance had been slightly dashed by his mother's prediction.

The opportunity to make sure about that important matter came a few minutes later, when Mabel came into the room looking more lovely, Joe thought, than he had ever seen her before. Mrs. Matson lingered only a moment longer, and then made an excuse to leave the room. The door had hardly closed behind her before Mabel was in Joe's arms.

It was a long time before they were able to talk coherently, and when at last Mabel told Joe that he was too greedy and laughingly bade him be sensible, she was more rosy and beautiful than ever, and Joe was deeper in love than before, if that could be possible.

Joe was not long in putting his mother's prediction to the test.

"Do you remember what Jim said when we said good-by to McRae after the World Tour was over?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eye.

The flush in Mabel's cheeks deepened.

"Jim talks so much nonsense," she countered.

"Think a minute." Joe was jogging her memory. "Wasn't it something about bells?"

"How should I remember?" asked Mabel, though she did remember perfectly.

"Well, I remember," said Joe. "He said I'd soon be hearing wedding bells. Now do you remember?"

"Y-yes," admitted Mabel at last, hiding her face on Joe's shoulder, which was very close to her.

"I want to hear those wedding bells, very soon, dearest," said Joe tenderly. "Next week—this week—to-morrow——"

Mabel sat up with a little scream.

"Next week—this week—to-morrow!" she repeated. "Why, Joe dear, we can't!"

"Why can't we?" asked Joe with masculine directness.

"Why—why—we just can't," replied Mabel. "I haven't got my wedding clothes ready. And I'll have to be married in my own home. What would my family think? What would my friends think? It would look like a runaway affair. People would talk. Oh, Joe dear, I'd love to, but I just can't. Don't you see I can't?"

Joe did not see at all, and he renewed his importunities with all his powers of persuasion. But Mabel, though she softened her refusal with lover-like endearments, was set in her convictions,

and Joe at last was forced to confess in his heart with a groan that his mother was right, and that he had a lot to learn about women.

He suggested in desperation that they go on at once to her home in Goldsboro and be married there, but although that would have taken away one of her arguments, the others still continued in full force, and she added another for good measure.

"You see, Joe, dear, your mother isn't well enough just now to travel so far, and it would break her heart if she weren't present at our marriage. By fall she may be better."

"By fall!" echoed Joe in dismay. "Have I got to wait that long?"

"I think it would be better, dear," said Mabel gently. "You see if we got married any time after the baseball season had commenced, you would find it hard to get away from your club. In any case, our honeymoon trip would have to be very short. Then, too, if I traveled about the circuit with you, you'd have me on your mind, and it might affect your playing. But I promise you that we shall get married in the fall, just as soon as the baseball season is over."

And as she sealed this promise in the way that Joe liked best, he was forced to be content.

The days passed by, as though on wings, with Joe grudging every minute as it passed that

brought him nearer to the day when he would have to rejoin his team. The hours were precious and he spent every one of them that he could with Mabel.

Jim, too, was finding his vacation delightful. He was getting on famously with Clara, and the latter's heart was learning to beat very fast when she heard the step and saw the face of the handsome young athlete. The prospects were very good that two weddings would be celebrated in the fall, and that Baseball Joe would gain not only a wife but a brother-in-law.

During that week the moon was at its full, and almost every night saw the two couples out for a stroll. They would start out from the house together and walk down the village street, with only a few yards separating them. However, they usually lost sight of each other before they had gone far.

Joe was happy, supremely happy. Mabel had never been so dear, so affectionate. He knew that he possessed her heart utterly. Yet there was a faint something, a mysterious impression to which he could scarcely give a name, that at times marred his happiness and caused him to feel depressed. He chased the feeling away, and yet it returned.

There were moments when Mabel grew quiet and seemed as though brooding over something.

Her face would become sad, and only brighten with a gayety that seemed a little forced, when she saw that he was studying her and seeking to learn what troubled her. At times she would cling to him as though she feared he was to be taken from her. Once or twice he questioned her, but she laughed his fears away and declared that there was nothing the matter. Despite her denials, he remained vaguely uneasy.

The day before his brief vacation came to an end there was a ring at the bell of the Matson home. Mabel, who happened to be in the hall at the time, opened the door. There was an exclamation of surprise and delight as the newcomer threw his arms about her.

“Reggie!”

“Mabel!”

There was a fond embrace, and then Mabel came into the living room where the family were assembled, while close behind her came Reggie Varley, her brother, the same old Reggie, monocle, cane, lisp, English clothes, English accent, fancy waistcoat, fitted in topcoat, spats and all—a vision of sartorial splendor!

CHAPTER IV.

THE ANONYMOUS LETTER

ALL rose to their feet in hearty welcome. It was not the first time Reggie had visited the Matson home, and all were fond of him. Joe and Jim especially gave him a hilarious greeting.

"Hello, Reggie, old man," cried Joe, as he shook hands. "I'm tickled to death to see you. What good wind blew you down this way? I didn't think you were within a thousand miles of here."

"Well, old top," explained Reggie, as he gracefully drew off his gloves and divested himself of his topcoat, "it was so beastly quiet in Goldsboro, don't y'know, that I got fed up with it and when the gov'nor suggested that there was a bit of business I could attend to in Chicago I just blew the bally town and ran out there. Then bein' so near, I thought I'd run down and see Sis and the rest of you. It's simply rippin' to see y'all again, don't y'know."

He sat down in a chair, carefully adjusting his trousers so as not to mar the creases in the legs,

and beamed blandly upon the friendly faces that surrounded him.

Joe and Reggie had first met under rather unpleasant circumstances, that bore no promise of a close friendship later on. Reggie had left his bag in a seat of a railroad station while he went to buy his ticket. Upon his return he missed his bag, which had been left in a seat adjoining the one in which Joe had in the meantime seated himself, and had practically accused Joe of taking it. As may be readily imagined, Joe was not the one to take lightly such an accusation, and Reggie had to apologize. It was only after Joe had met Mabel that he again encountered Reggie and learned that he was the girl's brother. But apart from his relationship to Mabel, Joe had found further reason for liking Reggie, as time wore on and he became better acquainted with him.

Reggie had never been restrained much by his father, who was rich and indulgent. He had an inordinate love of fine clothes and an affectation of English customs and manner of speech. But these, after all, were foibles, and at heart Reggie was "true blue." He was a staunch friend, generous, kindly and honorable. He idolized his charming sister, who in return was devotedly attached to him.

Another thing that strengthened the friendship between Joe and Reggie was that they were both

ardent lovers of the great national game. Reggie was a "dyed-in-the-wool fan," and though his general information was none too great he had the records of individual players and the history of the game at his tongue's end, and could rattle on for an hour on a stretch when he once got started on his favorite theme. He was a great admirer of Joe as a player, and intensely proud that he was going to be his brother-in-law. Whenever the Giants played and Joe was slated to pitch, the latter could be perfectly certain that Reggie, even if he chanced to be at the time in San Francisco, was "rooting" for him to win.

Jim also had met Reggie frequently and liked him thoroughly. The other members of the Matson family liked him, both for Mabel's sake and his own. So it was a very friendly circle into which Reggie had come so unexpectedly.

"But I didn't expect to see you two chaps here," said Reggie, as he looked from Joe to Jim. "I thought you were down in the training camp, or else on your way to New York with the rest of the Giants."

"It was just a bit of luck that we are here," replied Joe. "McRae thought that we were trained fine enough, and might go stale if we worked out in practice any longer. He wants us to be at the top of our form when the bell rings at the Polo Grounds."

"Bally good sense, I call it, too," replied Reggie, looking admiringly at their athletic forms. "Just now you look fit to fight for a man's life, don't y'know."

"Never felt better," admitted Joe. "Nor happier either," he added, as he glanced at Mabel, who dropped her eyes before his ardent look.

"You came just in time to see the boys," put in Mrs. Matson. "They're starting to-morrow for New York."

"Bah Jove, I'd like to go with them," said Reggie. "I'd give a lot to see that opening game on the Polo Grounds. But this beastly business in Chicago will make it necessary for me to go back there in a few days. In the meantime I thought that perhaps you might put me up here for a little while, don't y'know?"

He looked toward Mr. Matson as he spoke, and both he and Mrs. Matson hastened to assure the young man that they would be only too glad to do so.

All had a lot to talk about, and the evening passed quickly, until at last Mrs. Matson excused herself on the plea that she wanted to see about Reggie's room. Mr. Matson soon followed, and the young people were left to themselves.

"Well, what do you think the chances are of the Giants copping the flag again, old top?" asked Reggie, as he pulled down his cuffs and put up his

hand to make sure that his immaculate tie was all right.

"The Giants look mighty sweet to me," answered Joe. "They've had a good training season and shown up well in practice. They've won every game they've played with the minor leaguers so far, and haven't had to exert themselves. Of course that doesn't mean very much in itself, as the bushers ought to be easy meat for us. But we've got practically the same team with which we won the pennant last year, and I can't see why we shouldn't repeat. Jim here has been coming along like a house afire, and he'll make the fans sit up and take notice when they see him in action."

"Oh, I'm only an also ran," said Jim modestly.

"Indeed you're not," Clara started to say indignantly, but checked herself in time. Not so quickly, however, that Jim failed to catch her meaning and note the flush that rose to her cheek.

"Funny thing happened when I was in Chicago," mused Reggie. "I heard a chap say in one of the hotels that there was heavy betting against the Giants winning this year. Some one, he didn't know who, was putting up cash in great wads against them, and doing it with such confidence that it almost seemed as though he thought he was betting on a sure thing. Taking ridiculous odds too. Queer, wasn't it?"

"A fool and his money are soon parted," remarked Joe. "That fellow will be a little wiser and a good deal poorer when the season ends, or I miss my guess. Who's going to beat us out? Nothing short of a train wreck can stop us."

"Now you're talking!" cried Jim.

"Another thing that's going to help us," said Joe, "was that trip we had around the world. We had some mighty hot playing on that tour against the All-Americans, and it kept the boys in fine fettle."

"Speaking about that trip, old chap," put in Reggie, "reminds me of another thing that happened in Chicago. I was going down State Street one afternoon, and almost ran into that Braxton that you handed such a trimming to over in Ireland."

"Braxton!" cried Joe.

"Braxton!" echoed Jim.

"Sure thing," replied Reggie, mildly puzzled at the agitation that the name aroused in the two chums. "I'm not spoofing you. Braxton it was, as large as life. The bouncer recognized me and started to speak, but I gave him the glassy eye and he thought better of it and passed on. Funny what a little world it is, don't y'know."

"It surely is a little world," replied Jim, as a significant glance passed between him and Joe.

"I glanced back," Reggie went on, "and saw

him getting into a car drawn up at the curb. As classy a machine as I've seen, too, for a long time. Built for speed, y'know. If he hadn't driven off too quickly, I'd have made a note of the make. My own is getting rather old, and I've been thinking about replacing it."

The conversation turned into other channels and finally began to drag a little. The others made no sign of being ready to retire, and at last Reggie woke to the fact that he would have to make the first move. He looked at his watch, remarked that he was rather tired after his journey, and thought that he would "pound the pillow."

Joe showed him to his room, chatted with him a few minutes, and then returned to the living room where he found Mabel alone, as Clara and Jim had drifted into the dining room. It was the last night the boys would have at home, and the two young couples had a lot to talk about. To Jim especially the time was very precious, for he had made up his mind to ask a very momentous question, and there is little doubt but that Clara knew it was coming and had already made up her mind how it should be answered.

It was an exceedingly agitated Jim that asked Mr. Matson for a private interview the next morning, and it was an exceedingly happy Jim that emerged from the room a few minutes later and announced to the family already seated at the

breakfast table that Clara had promised to be his wife. There was a stampede from the chairs, to the imminent danger of the coffee being upset, and Clara was hugged and kissed by Mabel and hugged and kissed and cried over by her mother, while Jim's hand was almost wrung off by Joe and Reggie in the general jubilation. For Jim was a splendid fellow, a Princeton graduate, a rising man in his chosen calling, and an all round good fellow. And there was no sweeter or prettier girl than Clara in all Riverside, or, as Jim stood ready to maintain, in the whole world.

Needless to say that for the rest of that morning Reggie and Joe had no other masculine society than each could furnish to the other, for Jim had shamelessly abandoned them. Soon Reggie, too, had to chum with himself, as Joe and Mabel had found a sequestered corner and seemed to be dead to the rest of the world.

Just before noon, however, when Mabel had gone in to help Mrs. Matson to prepare lunch, Joe had a chance to talk with Reggie alone.

"Mabel's looking rippin', don't you think?" remarked Reggie, as he caught a glimpse of his sister passing the door of the room in which they sat.

"Most beautiful girl that lives," returned Joe, with enthusiasm.

"I guess she's stopped worrying about——"

began Reggie, and then checked himself as though he had said more than he intended to.

"Worrying about what?" asked Joe, with the quick apprehension of a lover.

"Oh, about—about things in general," replied Reggie, in some confusion and evading Joe's searching eyes.

"Look here, Reggie," said Joe with decision. "If anything's worrying Mabel, I've got a right to know what it is. I've noticed lately that she seemed to have something on her mind. Come now, out with it."

Reggie still tried to put him off, but Joe would have none of it.

"I've got to know, Reggie," he declared. "You've simply got to tell me."

Reggie pondered a moment.

"Well, old top," he said at last, "I suppose you have a right to know, and perhaps it's best that you should know. The fact is that Mabel got a letter a little while ago telling her that it would be a sorry day for her if she ever married Joe Matson. Threatened all sorts of terrible things against you, don't y'know."

"What!" cried Joe, wild with rage and leaping to his feet. "The scoundrel! The coward! Who signed that letter? What's his name? If I ever lay my hands on him, may heaven have mercy on him, for I won't!"

"That's the worst of it," replied Reggie. "There wasn't any name signed to it. The bounder who wrote it took good care of that."

"But the handwriting!" cried Joe. "Perhaps I can recognize it. Where is the letter? Give it to me."

"I haven't got it with me," Reggie explained. "It's at my home in Goldsboro. The poor girl had to confide in somebody, so she sent it to me. And even if you had it, it wouldn't tell you anything. It was in typewriting."

"But the postmark!" ejaculated Joe. "Perhaps that would give a clue. Where did it come from?"

"There again we're stumped," responded Reggie. "It was postmarked Chicago. But that doesn't do us any good, for there are two million people in Chicago."

"Oh!" cried Joe, as he walked the floor and clenched his fists until the nails dug into his palms. "The beastliness of it! The cowardice of it! An anonymous letter! That such a villain should dare to torture the dearest girl in the world! But somewhere, somehow, I'll hunt him out and thrash him soundly."

"Don't take the beastly thing so much to heart," returned Reggie. "Of course it's just a bluff by some bally bounder. Nobody ought to do anything with such a letter but tear it up and think no

more about it. Some coward has done it that has a grudge against you, but he'd probably never have the nerve to carry out his threats."

"It isn't that I care about," answered Joe. "I've always been able to take care of myself. I'd like nothing better than to have the rascal come out in the open and try to make his bluff good. But it's Mabel I'm thinking about. You know a woman doesn't dismiss those things as a man would. She worries her heart out about it. So that's what has been weighing on her mind, poor, dear girl. Oh, if I only had my hands on the fellow that wrote that letter!"

And here he yielded again to a justified rage that was terrible to behold. It would have been a bad day for the rascally writer of that anonymous letter if he had suddenly stood revealed in the presence of Joe Matson!

CHAPTER V.

“PLAY BALL!”

JUST then Mabel came in with her hands full of flowers that she meant to arrange for the table. She stopped short in consternation as she saw the thundercloud on Joe's brow. For a moment she thought that he and Reggie had been quarreling.

“Oh, Joe, what is it?” she asked in alarm.

Joe looked at her lovingly and his brow cleared.

“Nothing, honey,” he said, as he came up to her and slipped his arm around her. “It's only that I've just found out from Reggie what it is that's been worrying you.”

Mabel shot a reproachful glance at Reggie, who looked a little embarrassed.

“Joe got it out of me, Sis,” he explained. “Said he had a right to know and all that sort of thing, don't y'know. And 'pon honor, Sis, I don't know but what he's right about it.”

“Of course I'm right about it,” affirmed Joe. “There can't be anything now that concerns Mabel that doesn't concern me. Don't you agree with me, dearest?”

“I suppose so,” returned Mabel, as Joe drew her closer. “But, oh, Joe, I didn’t want to distress you about it. I was afraid that it would weigh on your mind and affect your work this season, and I knew how your heart was set on making a record. It was just for your sake, dearest, that I kept it to myself. Of course I would have told you sooner or later.”

“Well, now Mabel, listen to me,” said Joe, as he placed a chair and sat down beside her. “I don’t know what fellow has done this. But whoever he is, he is a coward as well as a rascal, and will never dare to carry out his threats against me. And even if he should, you know that I am perfectly able to take care of myself. You know that others have tried to injure me, but I always came out on top. Fleming tried it; Braxton tried it, and you know what happened to them. Now what I want you to promise me is to banish this beastly thing entirely from your memory. Treat it with the contempt it deserves. Will you promise me this?”

“I will promise, Joe,” answered Mabel. “I’ll try to forget that it ever happened.”

“That’s the girl,” commended Joe. “And to set your mind at rest I’ll promise on my part to take especially good care of myself. That’s a bargain.”

But while Joe had secured the promise of Mabel

to forget the letter, he had made no such promise himself, and he vowed that if he could ever get any trace of the writer of that letter he would give him the punishment he so richly deserved.

The train Baseball Joe and Jim Barclay would take was to leave late that afternoon.

Somehow general knowledge of that fact had got abroad, and the boys were dismayed, on reaching the station, to find that half the population of the little town had gathered there to say good-by and wish them luck. To many of the townspeople, Joe was a bigger man than the President of the United States. He had put Riverside "on the map," and through the columns of the papers they followed his triumphs and felt that in a sense they were their own.

Of course Joe appreciated this affectionate interest, but just at the moment all he wanted was to be alone with Mabel. He had already bidden his mother a loving farewell at the house, as she was not well enough to go to the station. Jim also had eyes and thoughts only for Clara.

But there was no help for it, and they had to exchange greetings and good wishes with the kindly friends who clustered around them. At the last minute, however, the young folks had a chance to say a few words to each other, and what they did not have time to say was eloquent in their eyes.

The train moved off, and the boys leaned far out of the windows and waved to the girls as long as they were in sight. Then they settled back in their seats, and for a long time were engrossed in their thoughts. Usually they were full of chaff and banter, but to-day it was some time before they roused themselves from reverie and paid attention to the realities around them.

It was after they had come back from the dining car after supper that Joe told Jim about his interview with Reggie and the anonymous letter. Jim's wrath was almost as great as that which had shaken Joe himself.

“And the worst of it is,” said Joe, “that there doesn't seem the slightest chance of getting hold of the cowardly fellow that did it. You might as well look for a needle in a haystack.”

“Yes,” agreed Jim, “that's the exasperating feature of it. It may be the work of gamblers who have bet against the Giants and want to worry you so that you won't pitch your best ball. Some of those fellows will do anything for money. Or it may have been done by some enemy who chose that way of striking in the dark.”

“If it's an enemy,” mused Joe, “that narrows it down. There's old Bugs Hartley, but I don't think he has intelligence enough to write a letter. Then there's Fleming, with whom I'm just about as popular as poison ivy. Add to that Braxton

and a few old-time enemies, and you've about completed the list."

"I wouldn't put it past Braxton," remarked Jim thoughtfully. "That fellow's a rattlesnake. He wouldn't stop at anything to get even with you."

"I hate to think he'd stoop as low as to try to strike me through a woman," replied Joe. "But, by Jove!" he went on, as a thought struck him, "do you remember what Reggie said about meeting Braxton in Chicago? You know while we were on the trip he mentioned Chicago as his home town. And that letter had the Chicago postmark."

"Oh, well, you couldn't hang a yellow dog on that," Jim replied. "But what struck me was what Reggie said about the speedy car that Braxton had. It must have been a mighty speedy car that got the fellow who laid that trap on the road from the training town to Hebron. Of course those things are only straws, of no value separately, though straws show which way the wind blows. One thing is certain. We've got to keep one man in our mind and guard against him. And that man's name is Braxton."

They reached New York without incident the day before the opening game, and found the city baseball mad. The front pages of the newspapers had big headlines discussing the opening of the season. The sporting pages overflowed

with speculation and prophecy as to the way the different teams would shape up for the pennant race. In the street cars, in the subways, in the restaurants, in the lobbies of the theatres, wherever men congregated, baseball was the subject of discussion. The long winter had made the populace hungry for their favorite game.

On the following day, the migration toward the Polo Grounds began long before noon. Every train was packed with eager, good-natured humanity on its way to the game. By noon the bleachers were packed, and an hour before the game was scheduled to begin, every inch of the grandstands were packed to overflowing.

The Bostons were to be the Giants' opponents in the opening game. The team had finished poorly the year before, but many winter trades had strengthened the weak spots, and the spring training of the nine had been full of promise. A close game was looked for, with the chances favoring the Giants.

McRae was anxious to win the opening game, and had selected Joe to “bring home the bacon.” Hughson's arm was not yet in shape, and the prospects were that Joe would have to bear the heft of the pitcher's burden if the Giants were to carry off the flag.

Both teams were greeted with hearty cheers as they came out on the field. The Bostons as the

visiting team, had the first chance at practice, and they uncovered a lot of speed in their preliminary work. Then the Giants took their turn in shooting the ball across the diamond and batting long flies to the outfielders.

The bell rang and the field was cleared, while a hush of expectation fell on the crowds. The blue-uniformed umpire stepped to the plate.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he bawled, “the batteries for to-day’s game are Albaugh and Menken for Boston, and Matson and Mylert for New York. Play ball!”

CHAPTER VI

GETTING THE JUMP

NEALE, the heavy hitting center fielder of the Bostons, who led off in the batting order, came to the plate, swinging three bats. He discarded two of them and took up his position, after having tapped his heel for luck.

Joe looked him over for a moment. Then he wound up and whipped one over the plate. It was a high fast one, and Neale swung at it, his bat missing the ball by fully three inches.

“Strike one!” called the umpire, and the crowd roared in approval. It was an auspicious beginning.

The next one was wide, and Neale refused to “bite.” Again Joe tempted him with a bad one, and again Neale was too wary. The next ball was a swift incurve that broke so suddenly that it buffaloed Neale completely. The lunge he made at it swung him round so that he almost lost his balance, and he looked rather sheepish as Mylert, the burly catcher of the Giants, grinned at him.

"Had that in my mitt before you swung at it," taunted Mylert. "Gee, but you're slow."

Neale glared at him, but made no reply and tightened his grip on the bat.

This time Joe floated up a slow teaser that looked as big as a balloon as it sailed lazily for the plate. Neale, who was all set for a fast one, nearly broke his back reaching for it.

"You're out," declared the umpire, while shouts and laughter came from the crowded stands, as Neale, flinging down his bat disgustedly, went back to the dugout.

Kopf, the next man up, dribbled a slow one to the box that Joe had no trouble in getting to first on time. Mitchell lifted a towering fly that Iredell gobbled up without moving in his tracks.

"Classy work, old man!" cried out Robbie, his face glowing with satisfaction, as Joe drew off his glove and came in to the bench. "The old wing seems to be working as well as ever."

The Giants did a little better in the first inning, though not well enough to chalk up a run. Curry started well by lining to center for a single, the ball just escaping Warner's fingers, as he leaped into the air for it. Iredell tried to sacrifice, but the ball went too quickly to the pitcher, who turned and caught Curry at second. Iredell tried to get down on the first ball pitched, but Menken showed that his throwing arm was right and nipped him

by three feet. Burkett lifted one between right and center that had all the earmarks of a home run, but Mitchell, by a great run, got to it with one hand and froze on to it. It was a remarkable catch, and the sportsmanlike New York crowd applauded it as heartily as though it had been made by one of their favorites.

"Highway robbery," growled Burkett, who had almost reached second before the ball was caught, and was cherishing hopes of having knocked out the first home run of the season.

It seemed clear that the Bostons were not to be trifled with, at least as far as their fielding was concerned, and the crowd settled down in expectation of a close struggle.

The second inning for the Bostons was short. Douglas sent up a pop fly to Willis at third. Barber fouled to Mylert. Warner tapped a little one in front of the plate that Mylert heaved to first. Each had offered at the first ball pitched, so that only three balls had been thrown for the entire inning.

The hard hitting that the Giants had done in the first session had resulted in nothing, but it had shown them that Albaugh could be hit, and they faced him with confidence when they next went to the bat.

But Albaugh had braced in his short breathing spell, and he set the Giants down in short order.

The best that Wheeler could do was to lift a high fly behind second that nestled comfortably in Douglas' hands. Willis got to first base on an error by Warner, but Denton hit into a double play, Ellis to Douglas to Kopf, and the inning was over.

In the third inning, the Bostons swung their bats in vain. Joe struck out Ellis, Menken and Albaugh, one after the other. His fast ball shot over the plate as though propelled by a gun. It came so swiftly that the Boston batsmen either winced and drew back, or struck at it after the ball had passed. His outcurve had a tremendous break, and Mylert had all he could do to get it. It was a superb example of pitching, and Joe had to remove his cap in response to the thunderous applause of the stands.

"Isn't that boy a wonder, Mac?" asked Robbie in exultation. "He's simply standing those fellows on their heads. They just can't touch him."

"He's the goods all right," agreed the less demonstrative McRae. "But don't let's crow too loud. The game isn't over yet by a long shot, and anything can happen in baseball."

Allen was the first man up in the Giants' half, and he went out on a grasser to Warner, who got him at first by yards. It was Joe's turn next.

"Win your own game now, Joe," said Jim, as his chum left the bench for the plate. "None of

the other boys seem to be doing much. Show them one of the clouts you made at the training camp."

Joe grinned in reply and went to the plate. Albaugh looked at him and thought he sensed an easy victim. He seldom had much trouble with pitchers.

The first ball was wide and Joe let it go by. The second and third also went as balls.

"Good eye, Joe," sang out Robbie, who was coaching at third. "Make him put it over."

Albaugh now was "in a hole." Three balls had been called on him, and he had to get the next one over the plate. He wound up carefully and sent over a swift straight one about waist high.

Joe timed it perfectly and caught it near the end of his bat. The ball went on a line straight toward the right field stands. On and on it went, still almost in a line. Neale and Barber had both started for it from the crack of the bat, but it stayed so low and went so fast that it eluded them and struck just at the foot of the right field bleachers.

Joe in the meantime was running like a deer around the bases, while his comrades leaped about and howled, and the crowds in the stands were on their feet and shouting like madmen. He had rounded second and was well on toward third before Neale retrieved the ball. He relayed it to Douglas like a shot. By this time Joe had turned

third and was dashing toward the plate. It was a race between him and the ball, but he beat the sphere by an eyelash, sliding into the rubber in a cloud of dust.

For a few moments pandemonium reigned, as Joe, flushed and smiling, rose from the ground and dusted himself off while his mates mauled and pounded him and the multitude roared approval.

“Jumping jiminy!” cried Jim, “that was a lalla-paloozer! It was a longer hit than you made off of me this spring, and that’s going some. And on a line too. I thought it was never going to drop.”

“It was a dandy, Joe,” commended McRae, clapping him on the shoulder. “It’s only a pity that there weren’t men on bases at the time for you to bring in ahead of you. But we’ve broken the ice now, and perhaps the rest of the boys will get busy.”

Albaugh was rather shaken by the blow, and gave Mylert his base on balls. Curry too was passed to first, advancing Mylert to second. The stage seemed set for more Giant runs, but Iredell hit a liner to Ellis who took it at his shoe tops and made a smart double play by getting it to second before Mylert could scramble back.

Still the Giants were a run to the good, and as the fourth and fifth innings went by without a score that run began to look as big as a meeting

house. Albaugh had stiffened up and was pitching superbly, while his mates were giving him splendid support. He mowed down the heavy batters of the Giants one after another, and McRae began to fidget about uneasily on the bench. One run was a slender margin, and he was intensely eager to win this first game, not only because of the enormous crowd that had turned out to see their favorites win, but because of the moral effect on his players of "getting the jump" on at least four of the other teams by winning the first game of the season.

When Joe came to the bat for the second time, there was a short consultation between Albaugh and his catcher, in which the astute manager of the Braves, Sutton, joined. Then Albaugh deliberately pitched four wild balls, and Joe trotted down to first.

There was a chorus of jeers and catcalls from the crowds.

"Got you rattled by that homer, did he?"

"You're a sport—I don't think!"

"Don't blame you for being afraid to let him hit it!"

"He'll lose the ball next time!"

"Crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after you!"

But although it was not exactly sportsmanlike, it was within the rules of the game, and when

Mylert went out on a fly a moment later, making the third out and leaving Joe stranded at first, Albaugh took off his glove and waved it mockingly at his tormentors.

In the sixth inning the Bostons took their turn at scoring. Kopf sent an easy grounder to Iredell, who ordinarily would have eaten it up. This time, however, he fumbled it for a moment, and then in his haste to make up for the mishap threw wild to first. Burkett made a great jump for it, but it went high over his head to the right field fence, and before Burkett could regain it Kopf was on third. Mitchell tried to bring him home, but his efforts resulted in a weak grounder along the third base line. It looked as though the ball would roll over the foul line, and Willis waited too long. It proved to be fair, and by this time Mitchell was legging it for second. Willis threw low and the ball hit the bag, bounding out into center field. Wheeler ran in and got it, making a superb throw to the plate. But it was too late, and both Kopf and Mitchell had scored, putting Boston in the lead by two runs to one.

Joe put on steam and struck out the next three batters. But the mischief had been done. Two miserable errors had given them as many unearned runs. Now all they had to do was to keep the Giants scoreless and the game would be won.

Poor Iredell and Willis were disconsolate as

they came in to the bench and their discomfiture was not lessened by the tongue lashing that McRae gave them. Joe, too, might naturally have been angered at the wretched support accorded to him in a game where he was showing such airtight pitching, but he was too fair and generous to find fault with comrades for a blunder that all athletes make more or less often.

"Never mind, boys," he said to them in an undertone, as he sat beside them on the bench. "Just get busy with your bats and we'll pull the game out of the fire yet."

Although the Giants made a desperate rally and in each of the next two innings got men on second and third, the score was unchanged and the game still "in the fire" when the eighth inning ended. Joe in the meantime had pitched with such effect that in the two innings not a man reached first.

The ninth inning came, and the Giants took the field for the last time.

"Now Joe," said McRae, as the former picked up his glove to walk out to the box, "hold them down just for one more inning, and we'll have a chance either to tie or win, if our boobs can wake up enough to do a little batting. The head of their batting order is coming up, but the way you've been pitching up to now they all look alike to you."

"I'll pitch my head off if necessary," Joe assured him.

The twirling that Joe did in that last inning was phenomenal. His control of the ball was almost uncanny. It writhed and twisted about the bats like a snake. Neale, the slugger of the Braves, struck out on the first three balls pitched. Kopf lifted a foul that came down straight over the plate, where Mylert gathered it in. Mitchell drove the ball straight over Joe's head, but the latter leaped high in the air and speared it with his gloved hand, while the stands rocked with applause.

McRae gathered the Giants about him as they came in from the field.

"Now you fellows listen to me," he commanded. "You've got to cop this game. No excuses. You've got to. Show these bean-eaters where they get off. Make them look like thirty cents. Knock the cover off the ball. Go in and win!"

CHAPTER VII

STEALING HOME

WILLIS was first to the bat, and he strode to the plate with blood in his eye. He was still smarting from the sharp words of the manager and was anxious for a chance to redeem himself. A hit would help to wipe out the memory of his error.

The first ball was an outshoot that just cut the corner of the plate. Willis struck at it and missed. The next one was a straight ball about knee high. Willis gave it a resounding clout, and it soared out toward the flagpole in left field.

Willis was off with the crack of the bat, footing it down to first, while a roar went up from the stands. It looked like a sure home run, and it was clear that the Boston left fielder could not get under it. The runner was well on his way to second before the ball touched the ground.

“Foul ball!” called the umpire.

There was a groan from the Giant rooters, and Robbie rushed from the dugout to protest. The umpire coldly waved him off.

"I said foul and that settles it," he declared, at the same time waving to Willis to come back to the plate.

It was a very disgruntled Willis that complied, and he took up his bat mumbling something about "blind" and "robber."

"What's that?" asked the umpire sharply.

"Nothing," growled Willis, as he squared himself to meet the next ball. It was a bad one, and he let it go by. The next suited him, and he sent a sizzling grounder between second and third, on which he might have made a double, had he been quicker on his feet. But he was of the "ice wagon" type and had to be content with a single.

Still it was a hit, and it put all the Giants on their toes in an instant. Their coaches at first and third began a chattering designed to rattle the pitcher. McRae hustled Denton out of the dugout with directions to sacrifice. The latter did his best, but Albaugh pounced on the ball and shot it to second, putting Willis out. Douglas whipped the ball to first in an endeavor to complete a double play, but Denton beat the ball by a step.

With one man out and the tail end of the Giant batting order coming up the outlook was decidedly gloomy. Hope revived, however, when Allen laced a single to left. It was a clean hit, but Mitchell ran in on it and fielded so smartly that Denton was held at second.

With two men on bases, Joe came to the bat, while the great throng gave him an ovation.

"Win your own game, Matson," was shouted at him from thousands of throats.

"Give the ball a ride!"

"Another homer, Joe!"

"Give the ball a passport and send it out of the country!"

These and other encouraging cries greeted Joe as he waited for the ball. Albaugh looked at him with some apprehension. His respect for him as a batter had grown considerably since the beginning of the game.

Joe refused to offer at the first ball, which was high and wide. Menken caught it and instead of returning it to the pitcher shot it down to second. Denton had taken too long a lead off the base and was trapped. His first impulse was to slide back to the bag, but he saw that he was too late for that and set out for third. The whole Boston infield joined in running him down, and despite his doubling and twisting, he was run down and put out near third. During the fracas, Allen reached second, but this was poor consolation, for now two men were out.

Albaugh grinned as he picked up the ball and stepped on the mound. Baseball Joe resolved to knock that grin off his face.

The ball came toward the plate like a bullet.

Joe timed it perfectly, and poled a tremendous hit out toward center.

"A homer! A homer!" yelled the crowd, wild with excitement.

By the time Allen had galloped over the plate, Joe had rounded second, running like a frightened jackrabbit. But in the meantime, Mitchell, by a herculean effort, had managed to knock down the ball, after it had struck the ground and was speeding toward the fence. He straightened up and threw it in a line to third. It came plump into the waiting hands of the guardian of the bag. But Joe had already pulled up there, panting a little, but with his heart full of exultation.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat, how that boy can hit!" cried McRae, while Joe's comrades jigged about and threw their caps into the air.

"As pretty a three-bagger as I ever saw," declared Robson. "That ties the score anyway. Now if Mylert can only bring him in, the game's ours."

Albaugh, though sore and enraged, still maintained perfect control of the ball. Twice in succession he sent it whizzing over the plate, and twice Mylert missed it by inches. Perhaps he was too anxious, but it was evident that his batting eye was off.

Albaugh sensed this, and felt so sure of his victim that he paid little attention to third. Sud-

denly, as Albaugh began to wind up for his pitch, Joe darted down the line for the plate. A warning cry from Menken and a roar from the crowd told Albaugh what was happening. He stopped his windup and threw to Menken, who was covering the rubber and yelling to him to throw. He threw high in his excitement. Menken caught the ball and bent down, just as Joe slid over the plate in a cloud of dust. Menken dabbled frantically at him, and they rolled on the ground together.

“Safe!” cried the umpire.

The game was won and the Giants had “got the jump.”

The crowd went mad. By thousands they rushed down from the stands and swarmed down over the field. Joe saw them coming and made a dash for the clubhouse. But before he had reached it, the crowd had closed in about him, and it was only by the assistance of his mates, who cleared a way for him, that he could get away from their wild enthusiasm and slip into its welcome shelter.

In a few minutes more the whole team had gathered there, laughing and shouting and going over the details of the game, while they took the showers and changed into their street clothes. There too came Robbie and McRae, as full of glee and happiness as the rest.

“You old rascal!” chortled Robbie, as he

slapped Joe on the back. "What are you trying to do? Be the whole team—gyp the other fellows out of their jobs? Such pitching, such batting—and then to cap it all by stealing home! Joe, old boy, I've seen lots of ball games, but your work to-day takes the cake."

McRae, though less demonstrative, was not a whit less delighted.

"Great work, Matson," he said. "Keep that up and there isn't a man in either league will be able to touch you."

Jim too was fairly stuttering with his pride in his chum's achievements.

"Picked the game right out of the fire," he exulted. "Tied it first and won it afterward. Joe old fellow, you're in a class by yourself. And that steal home! They'll talk about it all the season."

"Well," replied Baseball Joe, with a grin, "I got rather homesick on third, and that home plate looked mighty good to me."

Then Hughson came along with his congratulations, and these perhaps were the greatest reward that Joe could have asked for his day's work.

For Hughson had been Joe's baseball idol for the last ten years. For at least that period of time, Hughson had been confessedly the greatest pitcher that baseball had ever seen. During that decade he had been the mainstay of the Giant

team. When Hughson was slated to pitch, his mates were ready to chalk that game up in advance as won. And on the other hand, the opposing team was almost ready to concede the game before it was played. He had speed, curves and everything. At the most critical stage of a game he never lost his head. There might be three men on bases and none out, but that never disturbed Hughson. He would bring his wonderful "fade-away" into action and the batters would go down like ninepins. He had brawn—plenty of it—but in addition he had brain, and when it came to strategy and quick thinking there was no one to be compared with him.

But it was not merely his remarkable skill that had made him the hero of the baseball world. He was a gentleman through and through. He had had a college training and could meet and talk with educated men on equal terms. He was upright in his principles, clean in his living, quiet, plain, and unassuming. He was hail fellow well met with the other members of his team, and in fact with baseball players everywhere. Everybody liked him, and those who knew him best had a warm affection for him.

Nor was there the slightest touch of jealousy about him. If any one else could take his laurels by showing that he was a better pitcher, Hughson welcomed the opportunity to give him every

chance to do so. He was wholly wrapped up in the success of his team, and was only too glad to see any one helping to gain that success. His treatment of Joe since the latter had joined the team had been cordial in the extreme. He coached him, encouraged him, and did everything in his power to make him the star pitcher he saw he was destined to become.

Hughson had been hurt in a collision just before the final games of the previous year, and had not been able to take part in the World Series. His arm had become better, but he was still in no condition to pitch. So that it had been merely as a spectator that he had witnessed the triumph of the Giants in this opening game of the season.

Joe's eyes lighted up as he saw Hughson coming toward him with extended hand.

CHAPTER VIII

A BASEBALL IDOL

"PUT her there, Matson!" cried Hughson, his face beaming with pleasure. "I never saw better pitching than you showed us to-day."

Joe's face flushed. He shook Hughson's hand heartily.

"Oh, it's nothing compared with lots of games you've pitched, Hughson," he said. "I'm only in the infant class yet."

"A mighty husky infant," laughed Hughson. "At least that's what the Bostons think. It was a hard game for them to lose, just when they thought they had it tucked away in their bat bag."

"I feel rather sorry for Albaugh," said Joe. "He pitched a peach of a game and deserved to win."

"He sure did," conceded Hughson. "And nine times out of ten that kind of pitching would have won. But to-day he had the hard luck to be pitted against a better man. They got only one

clean hit off of you. The other was a scratch. A little more and you'd have pitched a no-hit game. And that's going some for the first game of the season, I'll tell the world.

"Another thing that tickled me," he went on, "was to see him pass you to first rather than give you a chance to hit the ball. That's a compliment to all the boxmen of the country. As a rule we're easy meat. The other pitchers are glad to see us come up to the plate. It has got to be a proverb that pitchers can't hit. But you gave the lie to that proverb to-day. Those two hits of yours were ticketed for the fence. And that steal home was the classiest thing I've seen for a blue moon. That's the kind of thinking that wins ball games. Do the thing the other fellow doesn't expect you to do."

"It was a case of touch and go," replied Joe. "I knew that I had touched the plate before Menken put the ball on me, but I wasn't sure the umpire would see it the same way. But he did, and that's all that matters. By the way, Hughson, how is that arm of yours coming along?"

"Not as well as I should like," responded Hughson, while a touch of gloom came into his face. "There are days when it feels all right, and other days when I can't lift it without pain. I've been down to see Reese again about it, and he can't see anything radically wrong with it. Says I'll have

to be patient and give it time. But it's mighty hard to have to sit on the bench when I'm fairly aching to get in the box again."

"I know just how you must feel," returned Joe sympathetically. "The boys are all rooting for you to get back into harness again. It doesn't seem the same old team with you out of the running."

"I'll be back with bells on before long," answered Hughson with a smile, as he moved on to have a chat with Robbie.

"Isn't he a prince?" Joe remarked admiringly to Jim, as they watched the back of the tall figure.

"He sure is an honor to the game," returned Jim. "Here's hoping that he'll soon be on deck again."

The next day the New York papers were full of the story of the game. There was a general feeling of jubilation over the auspicious start by the Giants, a feeling that was the more pronounced, because of the feeling that had previously prevailed that Hughson's continued disability would be a serious handicap to the chances of again winning the pennant.

One great subject dwelt upon in all the accounts was the marvelous pitching that Joe had shown. The sporting reporters "spread themselves" on the way he had held the Bostons in the hollow of his hand. To allow only two hits in the opening

game, and one of them a scratch, was a feat that they dwelt upon at length.

But scarcely less space was devoted to his batting. Although it was recalled that in the previous year he had had a creditable average at the bat, considering that he was a pitcher, his power as a twirler had kept his other qualities in the shade. Comment was made on the perfect way he had timed the ball and of the fact that his homer had gone nearly to the end of the grounds almost on a straight line, a fact that attested the tremendous power behind the hit. One of the papers headed its article: "Is There to Be a New Batting King?" and went on to say among other things:

"It is an extraordinary thing to pitch a two-hit game at the beginning of the season. But it is still more extraordinary that, despite the strain on the muscles and nerves of the pitcher who achieves that distinction, he should also have a perfect batting average for the day. That is what occurred yesterday. In four times at the bat he was passed twice and the other times poled out a triple and a home run. And this was done against heady and effective pitching, for Albaugh has seldom showed better form than in yesterday's game.

"One might have thought that with this record Matson would have called it a day and let it go at that. But he was still not satisfied. In the ninth,

with two men out and two strikes called on Mylert, he put the game on ice by stealing home from third—as unexpected and dazzling a play as we shall probably be fortunate enough to see this year. It was the climax of a wonderful game.

“McRae never made a shrewder deal than when he secured this phenomenal pitcher from St. Louis. We said this last year, when Matson’s great pitching disposed of Chicago’s chances for the pennant. We said it again when in the World Series he bore the heft of the pitcher’s burden and made his team champions of the world. But a true thing will bear repeating twice or even thrice, and so we say it now with added emphasis.”

All of the comment was in the same laudatory strain, although in reference to his batting, one paper cautioned its readers that not too much importance was to be attached to that. It was probably one of Matson’s good days, and one swallow did not make a summer. But whether he kept up his remarkable batting or not, the New York public would ask nothing more of him than to keep up his magnificent work in the box.

Joe would not have been human if he had not enjoyed the praise that was showered upon him in the columns that he and Jim read with interest the next morning. It was pleasant to know that his work was appreciated. But he was far too sensi-

ble to be unduly elated or to get a "swelled head" in consequence. He knew how quickly a popular idol could be dethroned, and he did not want the public to set up an ideal that he could not live up to.

It was for that reason that he read with especial approval the article that warned against expecting him to be a batting phenomenon because of his performance of yesterday.

"That fellow's got it right," he remarked to Jim, as he pointed to the paragraph in question. "I just had luck yesterday in straightening out Albaugh's slants. Another time and I might be as helpless as a baby."

"Luck, nothing!" replied Jim, who had no patience with Joe's depreciation of himself. "There was nothing fluky about those hits. You timed them perfectly and soaked the ball right on the nose. And look at the way you've been lining them out in training this spring. Wake up, man. You're not only the king of pitchers, but you've got it in you to become the king of sluggers."

"Oh, quit your kidding," protested Joe.

"I'm not kidding," Jim affirmed earnestly. "It's the solemn truth. You'll win many a game this year not only by your pitching but by your batting too. Just put a pin in that."

At this moment a bellboy tapped at the door, and being told to come in, handed Joe two tele-

grams. He tore them open in haste. The first was from Reggie and read:

“Keep it up, old top. Simply ripping, don’t you know.”

Joe laughed and passed it on to Jim.

“Sounds just like the old boy, doesn’t it?” he commented.

The second one was from Mabel:

“So proud of you, Joe. Not surprised though. Best love. Am writing.”

Jim did not see this one, but it went promptly into that one of Joe’s pockets that was nearest his heart, the same one that carried the little glove of Mabel’s that had been his inspiration in all his victorious baseball campaigns.

After a hearty breakfast, the chums went out for a stroll. Neither was slated to pitch for that day, and they had no immediate weight of responsibility on their minds. Markwith, the left-handed twirler of the Giants, would do the box work that day unless McRae altered his plans.

“Hope Red puts it over the Braves to-day the way you did yesterday,” remarked Jim, as they sauntered along.

“I hope so,” echoed Joe. “The old boy seems to be in good shape, and they’ve usually had

trouble in hitting him. They'll be out for blood though, and if they put in Belden against him it ought to be a pretty battle. Markwith beat him the last time he was pitted against him, but only by a hair."

It was a glorious spring morning, and as they had plenty of time they prolonged their walk far up on the west side of the city. As they were approaching a corner, they saw a rather shabbily dressed man slouching toward them.

Jim gave him a casual glance, and then clutched Joe by the arm.

"Look who's coming, Joe!" he exclaimed. "It's Bugs Hartley!"

CHAPTER IX

AN OLD ENEMY

BASEBALL JOE started as he looked at the man more closely.

"Bugs Hartley!" he ejaculated. "I thought we'd seen the last of that fellow. I imagined that by this time he'd be in jail or in a lunatic asylum."

"He'll get there some time likely enough," replied Jim. "But just now he's here. That's Bugs as sure as shooting."

It was evident that the man had recognized them also, for he stopped suddenly, as though debating whether to advance or retreat. He decided on the former course, and with an air of bravado came toward them. Joe and Jim would have passed him without speaking, but he planted himself squarely in their path, a malignant look glowing in his bleary eyes.

"So here you are again," he snarled, addressing himself to Joe.

"Sure thing," answered Joe coolly. "You see me, don't you?"

"I see you all right," replied Hartley, as his

eye took in Joe's well-dressed form. "All dolled up too. The man who took the bread and butter out of my mouth. Oh, I see you all right, worse luck."

Bugs Hartley had been a well known character in baseball for some years. He had gained his nickname from his erratic habits. He had never been any too strong mentally, and his addiction to liquor had still further contributed to throw him off his balance. But he had been a remarkable pitcher, with a throwing arm that made up for some of his mental deficiencies, and had played in several major league clubs. For some years he had been a member of the Giants, and was still a member when Joe joined the team. His vicious habits and utter failure to obey the rules of discipline had made him a thorn in his manager's side, but McRae had tolerated him because of his unusual skill in the box.

Joe had felt sorry for the man, and had done all he could to help him along. Once he had found him wandering intoxicated in the streets on the eve of an important game, and had got him off quietly to bed so as to hide the matter from McRae. But there was no gratitude in Hartley's disposition, and besides he was consumed with envy at seeing Joe's rapid progress in his profession, while he himself, owing to his dissipation, was going backward.

On one occasion, he had tried to queer Joe by doping his coffee just before the latter was scheduled to pitch in a game with Philadelphia. His hatred was increased when, after being knocked out of the box during a game, Joe had taken his place and won out. McRae at last lost patience with him and gave him his walking papers. Hartley's twisted brain attributed this to Joe, though as a matter of fact Joe had asked McRae to give Bugs another chance.

Hartley's reputation was so bad as a man and it was so generally understood that he was through as a pitcher that no other club cared to engage him. This increased his bitterness against the supposed author of his misfortunes. On one occasion he had tried to injure Joe in a dark street by hurling a jagged bolt of iron at his head, and the only thing that saved Baseball Joe was that at the moment he had stooped to adjust his shoelace. At that time Joe might have handed him over to the police, but instead he let him go with a warning. Now he had again met this dangerous semi-lunatic in the streets of New York.

"Now look here, Bugs," said Joe quietly and decidedly. "I'm just about tired of that kind of talk. I've done everything I could for you, and in return you've doped me and otherwise tried to hurt me. You've been your own worst enemy. I'm sorry if you're hard up, and if you need money

I'll give it to you. But I want you to keep away from me, and if there's any more funny business you won't get off as easily as you did last time."

"I don't want your money," snapped Bugs. "I'm after you, and I'll get you yet."

"I don't think you'd better try it. It won't get you anywhere, except perhaps in jail."

"There's ways of doing it," growled Hartley. "Ways that you ain't dreamin' of."

A sudden thought struck Joe.

"Do you mean anonymous letters?" he asked, looking keenly into Hartley's eyes.

"Anon-non—what do you mean?" the man asked sullenly. He was an illiterate man and had probably never heard the word before.

"Letters without any name signed to them," persisted Joe.

"Aw! what are you giving me?" snapped Hartley. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His mystification was so genuine that Joe knew that his shot, fired at random, had missed the mark. He could eliminate Hartley at once as a possible author of the anonymous letter Mabel had received.

"Never mind," said Joe. "Now one last word, Bugs. Twice you've tried to do me up and twice you've failed. Don't let it happen a third time. It will be three strikes and out for you if you do."

He made a move to pass on. Hartley seemed for a moment as though he would bar the way, but the steely look in Joe's eyes made him think better of it. With a muttered imprecation he stepped aside, and the two friends moved on.

"A bad egg," remarked Jim, as they walked along.

"I don't know whether he's just bad or is mad," replied Joe regretfully. "A combination of both I suppose. He's got the fixed idea that I've done him a wrong of some kind and his poor brain hasn't room for anything else. It's too bad to see a man that was once a great pitcher go to the dogs the way he has. I suppose he picks up a few dollars now and then by pitching for semi-professional teams. But most of that I suppose is dissipated."

"Well, you want to keep on your guard against him, Joe," warned Jim, in some anxiety. "A crazy man makes a dangerous enemy."

"Oh, I don't think there's any need of worrying about Bugs," rejoined Joe carelessly. "The chances are ten to one we'll never run across him again."

The encounter had rather spoiled their morning, and they hailed a taxicab to take them back to their hotel. There they had lunch and then rode up to the Polo Grounds for the game.

As Joe had predicted, the Bostons that after-

noon were out for blood and they evened up the score. Markwith pitched a good game except for one bad inning when he lost control, and hits, sandwiched in with passes and a wild pitch, let in three runs. He braced up after that, but it was too late, and the Giants had to take the little end of the score.

In the next two weeks the Giants met the rest of the Eastern teams, and, taking it as a whole, the result was satisfactory. They had no trouble in taking the Phillies into camp, for that once great team had been shot to pieces. The majority of the Boston games also went to the Giants' credit. They met a snag, however, in Brooklyn, and the team from over the bridge took four games out of six from their Manhattan rivals. But then the Brooklyns always had been a hoodoo for the Giants, and in this season, as in many others, they lived up to the tradition.

Still the Giants wound up their first Eastern series with a percentage of 610, which was respectable if not brilliant. But now their real test was coming. They were about to make their first invasion of the West, where the teams were much stronger than those of the East. Cincinnati was going strong under the great leader who had once piloted the Phillies to a championship. Chicago was quite as formidable as in the year before, when the Giants had just nosed them out at the

finish. St. Louis, though perhaps the least to be feared, was developing sluggers that would put the Giants' pitchers on their mettle. But most of all to be feared was Pittsburgh, which had been going through the rest of the Western teams like a prairie fire.

"Pittsburgh's the enemy," McRae told his men, and Robbie agreed with him. "Beat those birds and you'll cop the flag!"

CHAPTER X

THREE IN A ROW

THE first jump of the team was to Cincinnati, and there they found their work cut out for them. The Reds had just lost three out of four to Pittsburgh, and they had got such a talking to from their manager, from the fans, and from the press of the city that they knew they had to do something to redeem themselves. They knew that if they could hold the Giants even, it would be something; if they could take three out of four they would be forgiven; while if they could make a clean sweep of the series they would "own the town."

It was a singular thing what delight all the Western teams, and for that matter all the teams of the League, took in beating the Giants. A victory over them, of course, did not count any more in the final score than a victory over one of the tailenders; but there was a fiendish satisfaction in taking the scalps of the team from the "Big Town." So that the managers always saved their

best pitchers for the games with the Giants, while they took a chance with their second string pitchers against the other teams. This of course was a compliment; but it was a compliment that the Giants did not especially appreciate, for it made their task harder than that of any other team in the League.

So when the Giants learned that Dutch Rutter was to try his prowess against them in the opening game, they were not surprised. Rutter was a left-hander who had made a phenomenal record the preceding year, and he had been especially rested up and groomed with the Giant series in view. Meran, the manager, had figured that if he could win the first game with Rutter he could come back with him in the fourth, and thus have at least a chance of getting an even break on the series.

But McRae, anticipating such a move, had so arranged his own selection of pitchers that Joe was in line for the first game, and he was not afraid to pit his "ace" against the star boxman of the Cincinnati.

His confidence was justified, for Baseball Joe won out after a gruelling struggle. In Rutter he had found an opponent worthy of his steel. For six innings neither team broke into the run column. Rutter had superb control for a left-hander, and he showed a most dazzling assortment of curves and slants. But Joe came back at

him with the same brand of pitching that he had shown in the opening game, and the Cincinnati batsmen were turned back from the plate bewildered and disgruntled. In vain their manager raved and stormed.

“Why don’t you hit him?” he asked of his star slugger, as the latter came back to the bench, after having been called out on strikes.

“Hit him!” Duncan came back at him. “What chance have I got of hitting him, when I can’t even hit the ball he pitches?”

Still the Giants had a scare thrown into them when in the ninth inning, by a succession of fumbles and wild throws, the Cincinnati had three men on bases and none out. As they themselves had only one run, scored in the seventh inning by a three base hit by Joe, aided by a clean single by Mylert, the chances looked exceedingly good that the Cincinnati might tie the score or win the game. A clean single would have brought in one run and probably two.

But Baseball Joe was always at his best when most depended on him. While the coaches tried to rattle him and the crowds frantically adjured Thompson, who was at the bat, to bring the men on bases in to the plate, Joe was as cool as a cucumber.

He threw a swift high one to Thompson which the latter missed by three inches. Mylert threw

the ball back to Joe, who stopped it with his foot and stooped as though to adjust his shoe lace. He fumbled an instant with the lace, and then suddenly picking up the ball hurled it to second like a shot. Emden, who was taking a long lead off the base, tried to scramble back, but Denton had the ball on him like a flash. Mellen who was on third made a bolt for the plate, but Denton shot the ball to Mylert, and Mellen was run down between third and home. While this was going on, Gallagher had taken second, and profiting by the running down of Mellen, kept on half way to third. He did not dare go all the way to third, because Mellen still had a chance to get back to that base. But the instant Mellen was touched out, Joe, who had taken part in running him down, shot the ball to Willis at third and Gallagher was caught between the second and third bags. Three men were out, the game was over, and the Giants had begun their Western invasion with a 1 to 0 victory.

Joe's quick thinking had cleared the bags in a twinkling. It had all come so suddenly that the crowd was dumbfounded. Meran, the Cincinnati manager, sat on the bench with his mouth open like a man in a daze. His men were equally "flabbergasted." Thompson still stood at the plate with his bat in hand. It seemed to him that a bunco game had been played on him, and he was still trying to fathom it.

Then at last the crowd woke up. They hated to see the home team lose, but they could not restrain their meed of admiration and applause. The stands fairly rocked with cheering. They had seen a play that they could talk about all their lives, one that happens perhaps once in a generation, one that they would probably never see again.

McRae and Robbie for a moment acted like men in a trance. Over Robbie's rubicund face chased all the colors of the chameleon. It almost seemed as though he might have a stroke of apoplexy. Then at last he turned to McRae and smote him mightily on the knees.

"Did you see it, John?" he roared. "Did you see it?"

"I saw it," answered McRae. "But for the love of Pete, Robbie, keep that pile driver off my knees. Yes, I saw it, and I don't mind saying that I never saw anything like it in my thirty years of baseball. I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming."

"A miracle man, that's what he is!" ejaculated Robbie. "That wing of his is wonderful, but it's the head on him that tops any other in the league. He wasn't behind the door when brains were given out."

Meran, the Cincinnati manager, who was a good sport, after he had recovered from his

astonishment, came over to the Giants' bench and shook hands with McRae and Robson.

"It was a hard game to lose, John," he said to the Giants' manager. "I thought we had it sewed up in the ninth. But there's no use bucking against that pitcher of yours. I'm only glad that you can't pitch him in all your games."

Joe, flushed and smiling, was overwhelmed with congratulations, but he made light of his feat, as was his custom.

"It was simple enough," he protested. "I had the luck to catch Emden off second and the boys did all the rest."

"Simple enough," mimicked Jim. "Oh, yes, it was simple enough. That's the reason it happens every day of the week."

It was a good beginning, but the old proverb that "a good beginning makes a bad ending" was illustrated in this Western tour. For some reason most of the Giant pitchers could not "get going." Jim pulled out a victory in the Cincinnati series, but Markwith lost his game, and Hughson, who tried to pitch one of the games, found that he was not yet in shape.

That series ended two and two. In Chicago the Giants had to be content with only one victory out of the series. They hoped to make up for this in St. Louis. But they found that the fame of "Murderers' Row" had not been exaggerated,

and there was a perfect rain of hits from the Cardinals' bats that took two games out of three, the fourth that had been scheduled being held up by rain.

When the team swung around to Pittsburgh, there were some added wrinkles between McRae's brows.

"If we can only break even with Cincinnati and get the little end of it in Chicago and St. Louis, what will Pittsburgh do to us?" he asked Robbie, with a groan.

"What Pittsburgh will do to us, John," replied Robbie soberly, "is a sin and a shame!"

CHAPTER XI

RIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER

THE Smoky City was all agog over the games. It had won championships before, but that was in the days of Fred Clarke and Honus Wagner and other fence breakers. It had been a good many years since it had seen a pennant floating over Forbes Field, and old-timers were wont to shake their heads sadly and say they never would see it again.

But this year the "dope" pointed in the right direction. The management of the team had strengthened the weak point in the infield by a winter trade that had brought to them "Rabbit" Baskerville, the crackerjack shortstop of the Braves. The benefit of the change had been manifested in the spring practice when the Rabbit had put new pep and ginger in the team. And in the regular games so far they had had little difficulty in winning a large majority from their rivals. How they would hold out against the Giants was

the problem that yet remained to be solved. But unless the Giants showed a decided reversal from the form in which they had been playing recently, it would not be so very hard to take them also into camp.

The Giants themselves felt none too much confidence, as they prepared for this important series. One bit of luck came to them, however, in the return at this juncture of Larry Barrett to the team. He had been down with an attack of intermittent fever that had kept him out of part of the spring practice and had prevented him thus far from playing in any of the regular games. But on the team's arrival in Pittsburgh, they found Barrett waiting for them, looking a little lighter than usual, but declaring himself in excellent condition and fit to play the game of his life.

The previous year he had guarded the keystone bag, and by general consent was regarded as the best second baseman in the League. His batting too was a powerful asset to the team, as season after season he ranked among the .300 hitters. Apart from his superb playing at bat and in the field, he also helped to keep the boys in good spirits. His wit and love of fun had gained him the nickname of "Laughing Larry," and no team of which Larry was a member could stay long in the doleful dumps.

His coming made necessary a change in the

team. Allen, who had not made a success in playing the "sun field," was benched, and Denton, whose batting could not be spared, was shifted to right field in his place, while Larry resumed his old position at second.

On the morning of the day of the first game, McRae called his players together for a few words of counsel. At least he called it counsel. The players were apt to refer to it as roasting.

"I've been thinking," he said, "that I've got the greatest collection of false alarms of any manager in either of the big leagues."

This was not an especially encouraging beginning, but each of the men tried to look as though the manager could not by any possibility be referring to him. Some of them hoped that he would not descend from generalities to particulars.

The manager's keen eyes ranged around the circle as though looking for contradiction. There was a silence as of the tomb.

"You fellows haven't been playing baseball," he went on. "You've been playing hooky. Look at the way you've let the other teams walk over you. The Chicagos took three out of four from you. The Cardinals grabbed two out of three, and its only the mercy of heaven that rain kept them from copping another. Look at the way you've been batting. Every team in the League except the Phillies has a better average. You've

got enough beef about you to knock the ball out of the lot, and you've been doing fungo hitting, knocking up pop flies. What in the name of seven spittin' cats do you mean by it? Every time you collect your salaries you ought to be arrested for getting money on false pretenses."

He paused for a moment, and some of the more hopeful players thought that perhaps he was through. But he was only getting his breath. He faced them scornfully.

"Giants!" he exclaimed with sarcasm. "Giants you call yourselves. Get wise to yourselves. If you're Giants, I'm a Chinaman. It's dwarfs you are, pygmies. Now I want you boobs to get one thing into your heads. Get it straight. You've got to win this series from Pittsburgh. Do you get me? You've got to! If you don't, I'll disband the whole team and start getting another one from the old ladies' home."

Much more he said to the same effect, with the result that when the men, with heightened color and nerves rased by his caustic tongue lashing, left the clubhouse, they were in red-hot fighting mood. Pygmies were they? Well, on the ball field they'd prove to McRae that he didn't know what he was talking about.

An immense crowd was present that filled Forbes Field to capacity when the bell rang for the beginning of the game. Joe had pitched only two

days before, and McRae decided to send Markwith into the box.

In the first inning, Dawley, the Pittsburgh pitcher, found it hard to locate the plate, and Curry was passed to first. On the hit and run play, Iredell popped to the pitcher, and Curry had all he could do to get back to first. Burkett lined a clean hit over the second baseman's head, but by sharp fielding Curry was kept from going beyond the middle bag. On the next ball pitched, Curry tried to steal third but was thrown out. Burkett in the meantime had got to second, but he was left there when Wheeler sent a long fly to center that Ralston captured after a hard run.

The Pittsburghs were not long in proving that they had their batting clothes on. Ralston landed on the first ball that Markwith sent up for a home run. The crowd chortled with glee, and the Giants and the few supporters they had in the stands were correspondingly glum. The blow seemed to shake Markwith's nerve, and the next batter was passed. Bemis sent a sizzling grounder to Iredell and it bounced off his glove, the batter reaching first and Baskerville taking second on the play. Astley dribbled a slow one to Markwith, who turned to throw to third, but finding that Baskerville was sure of making the bag, turned and threw high to Burkett at first. The tall first baseman leaped high in the air and knocked it

down, but not in time to get his man. With the bases full Brown slapped a two bagger to center that cleared the bases, three men galloping over the plate in succession.

It was evidently not Markwith's day, and McRae beckoned him to come in to the bench while the crowd jeered the visitors and cheered their own favorites. Poor Markwith looked disconsolate enough, and after a moment's conference with McRae, which he was not anxious to prolong, he meandered over the field to the showers.

"Bring on the next victim!" taunted some of the spectators. "All pitchers look alike to us to-day. Next dead one to the front."

McRae held a brief consultation with Robbie, and then nodded to Jim.

"Go to it, Jim," encouraged Joe. "I'm rooting for you, old man. Pull some of the feathers out of those birds. It's a tough job bucking against a four run lead, but you're the boy to do it."

"I'll do my best," answered Jim, as he put on his glove and went into the box.

It was the cue for the crowd to try to rattle him. The coachers began chattering like a lot of magpies, and the man on second began to dance about the bag and shout to Garrity, the next batsman, to bring him in.

Jim sent one over the plate that cut it in half, but the batsman had orders to wait him out, under

the supposition that he would be wild. So he let the second one go by also.

“Strike two!” called the umpire.

Garrity braced. This was getting serious. This time Jim resorted to a fadeaway that Garrity swung at with all his might. But the ball eluded him and dropped into Mylert’s mitt.

“You’re out!” snapped the umpire, waving him away from the plate.

CHAPTER XII

JIM'S WINNING WAYS

"GOOD boy, Jim!" cried Joe, as his chum came in to the bench. "You put the Indian sign on that fellow all right. Just hold them down and trust to the boys to bat in some runs to even up the score."

But if the boys had any such intentions they certainly took their time about it. Larry, to be sure, poled out a long hit to right that had all the signs of a homer, but Astley backed up and fairly picked it off the wall. Denton cracked out a single between first and second. Jim hit sharply to third, and O'Connor by a superb stop got the ball to first in time, Denton in the meantime reaching second. Mylert swung savagely at the ball, but it went up straight in the air and Dawley gathered it in.

In their half of the second, the Pittsburghs increased their lead to five. O'Connor struck out on the first three balls pitched, but Jenkins caught the ball on the nose for a single to center. Curry

thought he had a chance to make a catch, and ran in for it, instead of waiting for it on a bound. By this mistake of judgment the ball got past him, and before it could be retrieved Jenkins by fast running had crossed the plate. Dawley was easy on a bounder to Willis, and Ralston, in trying to duck away from a high incurve, struck the ball with his bat and sent it rolling to Burkett for an out.

"Not much nourishment for us in that inning," muttered McRae, as he watched the man chalking up another run for Pittsburgh on the big scoreboard at the side of the field.

"No," agreed Robbie. "But you'll notice that the run wasn't earned. If that hit had been played right, Jenkins would have been held for a single."

"Give them a row of goose eggs, Dawley," was the advice shouted to the Pittsburgh pitcher, as he stepped into the box.

Dawley grinned with supreme confidence. And for the third and fourth inning his confidence seemed justified. The ball came zipping over the plate with all sorts of twists and contortions, and the Giants seemed helpless before him. They either struck out or put up feeble flies and fouls that were easily gathered up. Only one hit went outside the diamond and that plumped square into the hands of the waiting center fielder.

But in the meantime, the Pittsburghs were getting a little uneasy about the kind of pitching that Jim was sending across. His fast ball went so swiftly that the eye could scarcely follow it. He had perfect control, and the "hop" on the ball just before it got to the plate was working to perfection. The way he worked the corners of the plate was a revelation. And in the fourth inning, when he struck out the side on nine pitched balls, a ripple of applause was forced from the spectators, despite their desire to see the home team win.

"You're going like a house afire, old man," exclaimed Joe, as the Giants came in for their turn.

"That's what he is," agreed Robbie, who had overheard the remark. "But it won't do any good unless our boys wake up and do something with their bats. That five run lead is bad medicine."

It did not look any better to the Giants than it did to Robbie, and in the fifth inning they began to come to life. Dawley, for the first time, seemed to be a little shaky in his control. He passed Iredell and then tried to fool Burkett on a slow ball. But the latter timed it exactly and poled it out between left and center for a beautiful three-bagger. Iredell scored easily and a roar went up from the men in the Giants' dugout as he crossed the plate.

"Here's where we start a rally, boys!" cried

Robbie. "Every man on his toes now. Here's where we send this pitcher to the showers."

Wheeler went to the plate with directions to sacrifice, which he did neatly by sending a slow roller to first, on which Burkett scored. Willis clipped out a liner to right, which was really only good for a single, but in trying to stretch it to a two baser he fell a victim at second. Then Larry came to the bat.

"Show them that you're layoff hasn't hurt your batting eye, Larry," sang out McRae.

The first ball was wide, and Larry held his bat motionless. On the second offering he fouled off. The third was about waist high, and Larry swung at it. The ball soared off to right field and landed in the bleachers. It was a clean home run and Larry trotted easily around the bases, a broad grin on his good-natured Irish face.

"We're finding him!" shouted McRae. "We've got him going! Now, Denton, put another one in the same place."

Denton did his best, but it was not good enough. Dawley had tightened up and was sending the ball over the plate as though thrown from a catapult. Two strikes were called on Denton, and then he put up a fly just back of second which Baskerville caught in good style.

The inning was over, but the Giants felt better. There was a big difference between five to none

and five to three. Besides, they had learned that Dawley could be hit.

"Keep them down, Jim, and we'll put you in the lead next inning," prophesied Larry, as he passed him on his way out to second.

Jim proceeded at once to keep them down. He had never been in better form. The three runs that his mates had scored had put new heart in him and he made the Pittsburghs "eat out of his hand." They simply could not get going against him.

His sharp breaking curve had their best batters completely at sea. They were swinging in bewilderment at balls that they could not reach. For the next three innings not a man reached first base and in the eighth inning he mowed them down on strikes as fast as they came to the plate.

"Oh, if we'd only started the game with him!" groaned McRae, as the eighth inning ended with the score unchanged.

For in the meantime Larry's prophecy had not been fulfilled that the Giant batsmen would gain the lead. They had been hitting more freely than in the early part of the game, but had been batting in hard luck. Every ball they hit seemed to go straight to some fielder, and the Pittsburghs were giving their pitcher magnificent support. There was one gleam of hope in the eighth, when with

two men out, a Giant was roosting on second and another on third. But hope went glimmering when Burkett's hoist to center was easily gathered in by Ralston.

"We can win yet," crowed Robbie, with a confidence he was far from feeling, as the Giants entered on their last inning. "There's many a game been won in the ninth. Go in now and knock him out of the box."

Wheeler started in with a single that just escaped the outstretched hands of Baskerville. McRae himself ran down to first to coach him. Willis followed with another single on which Wheeler went all the way to third. It looked as though the long-hoped for rally had at last commenced.

But a groan went up from the Giant dugout when Willis, on the next ball pitched, started for second and was nailed by three feet. Still Larry was next at bat, and his comrades, remembering his last home run, urged him to repeat.

Larry was only too eager to do so, and on the second ball pitched laced it to right field for what looked to be a homer but went foul by a few feet only. The next was a missed strike. Two balls followed in quick succession and then, with the count three to two, slapped out a rattling two-bagger to center. Wheeler scored and the tally was five to four in Pittsburgh's favor.

Then to Joe's surprise McRae beckoned him from the dugout.

"What's the big idea?" Joe asked, as he came up to his manager.

"I'm going to put you in as a pinch hitter," answered McRae. "I'd rather take a chance on you than Denton. Get in there now and knock the cover off the ball."

There was a gasp of surprise from the stands. In their experience it was usually a pitcher who was taken out to make room for a pinch hitter. It was almost unheard of that the procedure should be reversed. To them it seemed a sign that McRae was at the end of his rope, and there were catcalls and shouts of derision as Joe came to the plate. And these redoubled in volume as he missed the first ball that Dawley sent over.

"What did I tell you, boys?"

"Nit, on that!"

"Matson is all right as a pitcher, but as a batter, nothing doing."

"Give him two more like that, Dawley!"

"Take your time, Joe!"

"Make him give you the kind you want!"

"Here is where Pittsburgh chews the Giants up!"

"Maybe you can do it somewhere else, but you can't do it here!"

"One, two, three, Dawley, remember."

So the calls ran on as Joe waited for the pitcher to deliver the sphere again.

The Pittsburgh rooters thought they had Joe's "goat" and they were prepared to make the most of it. They began a chorus of yells and groans that grew louder and louder.

They stopped suddenly as Joe caught the next ball about a foot from the end of his bat. There was a mighty crack and the ball soared up and up into the sky over right field. The fielders started to run for it and then stopped short in their tracks, throwing up their hands in despair. The ball cleared the bleachers, cleared the wall, and went through the window of a house on the other side of the street.

Joe had started running like a deer at the crack of the bat, but as he rounded first McRae shouted at him to take his time, and he completed the rest of his journey at a jog trot, Larry of course having preceded him. There was a wild jubilee at the plate. Robbie threw dignity to the winds and danced a jig, and Joe was sore from the thumping of his mates.

"The longest hit that's ever been made on Forbes Field!" cried Larry exultingly.

"Old Honus Wagner in his best days never made such a clout," joined in Jim. "Joe, old boy, you've saved the game."

"It isn't over yet," cautioned Joe smilingly;

“but if you keep up the same brand of pitching you’ve been showing us, they won’t have a Chinaman’s chance.”

The next two batters were easy outs and the Giants’ half was over. The Pittsburghs came in for their last chance, determined to do or die. It was exasperating for them to have the game snatched from them when they were just about to put it on their side of the ledger. But Jim put out the first one on a puny fly and sent the last two back to the bench by the strike-out route—and the game was over.

In their first clash with the redoubtable Pittsburghs, the Giants had won by six to five!

CHAPTER XIII

A BREAK IN THE LUCK

IT was a highly elated crowd of Giants that chattered away excitedly in the clubhouse after the finish of the game. Jim and Joe came in for the major share of the honors, the first because of his superb pitching and the latter for the glorious home run that had clinched the victory.

"Some pitching, Barclay," said Hughson, clapping Jim on the shoulder. "Do you realize that only thirty-two batters faced you and that eleven of them went out on strikes? That's what I call twirling.

"It'll take some of the chestiness out of these Pirates," laughed Larry. "They thought we were going to be as easy meat for them as the rest of the teams. And, begorra, it looked as though we would from the way the game started."

"You did your share all right, Larry," replied Jim. "That home run of yours was a beauty. And that two-bagger was no slouch."

"But that clout of Joe's was the real cheese," said Denton generously. "Gee, Joe, I was a little

sore when McRae put you in to take my turn at bat. But when I saw that old apple clear the fence I knew that the old man had the right dope. I haven't made a hit like that since I've been in the game."

"Who has?" queried Curry. "I'll bet it comes pretty close to being a record. If that house hadn't been in the way the ball would be going yet."

"Don't forget, Joe, that you'll have to pay for that broken window," laughed Wheeler.

"I guess McRae would pay for a hundred broken windows and never say a word," chuckled Iredell.

He would have been still more sure of this had he been able to see McRae's face at that moment and overheard what he was saying to Robson.

"You've had a real bit of luck to-day, John," the latter had remarked, his broad face radiant with satisfaction. "You've discovered that you have another first string pitcher. That work of young Barclay was simply marvelous."

"You said it, Robbie," agreed McRae. "It was a rough deal to give a young pitcher the job of beating the Pittsburghs after they had a four run lead. But he stood the gaff and came through all right. From this time on he'll take his regular turn in the box. But it isn't that that pleases me most in this day's work."

"What is it then?" asked Robbie.

"It's the batting of Matson," replied McRae thoughtfully. "I've been in the game thirty years, and I've seen all the fence-breakers—Wagner, Delehanty, Brouters, Lajoie, and all the rest of them. And I tell you now, Robbie, that he's the king of all of them. The way he stands at the plate, the way he holds his bat, the way he times his blow, the way he meets the ball—those are the things that mark out the natural batter. It's got to be born in a man. You can't teach it to him. All the weight of those great shoulders go into his stroke, and he makes a homer where another man would make a single or a double. Now mark what I'm telling you, Robbie, but keep it under your hat, for I don't want the kid to be getting a swelled head. In Baseball Joe Matson we've got not only the greatest pitcher in the game, but the hardest hitter in either league. And that goes."

"Oh, come now, John," protested Robbie, "aren't you going a little too strong? The greatest pitcher, yes. I admit that. There's no one in sight now that can touch him, now that Hughson's laid up. And between you and me, John, I don't believe that even Hughson in his best days had anything on Matson. But when you speak of batting, how about Kid Rose of the Yankees?"

"He's all to the good," admitted McRae.

"He's got a wonderful record; the best record in fact of any man that has ever broken into the game. He topped the record for home runs last season, and by the way he's starting in this year he'll do it again. Up to now we haven't had anyone in the National League that could approach him. But I'm willing to bet right now that he never made so long a hit as Matson made this afternoon. Of course Rose has had more experience in batting than Matson, and for the last two or three years he's hardly done any pitching. But if I should take Matson out of the box right now and play him in the outfield every day, I'll bet that by the end of the season he'd be running neck and neck with Kid Rose and perhaps a wee bit ahead of him."

"Well, maybe, John," agreed Robbie, though a little doubtfully. "But what's the use of talking about it? You know that we can't spare him from the box. He's our pitching ace."

"I know that well enough," replied McRae. "But all the same I'm going to see that he has many a chance to win games for us by his batting as well as by his pitching. On the days he isn't pitching, I'll use him as a pinch hitter, as I did today. Then, too, when he is pitching, I'm going to make a change in the batting order. Instead of having him down at the end I'm going to put him fourth—in the cleanup position. If that old

wallop of his doesn't bring in many a run I'll miss my guess."

The very next day McRae had a chance to justify his theories. Hughson had told the manager that he thought he was in shape to pitch, and McRae, who had great faith in his judgment, told him to go in. The "Old Master," as he was affectionately called, used his head rather than his arm and by mixing up his slow ball with his fast one and resorting on occasion to his famous fadeaway, got by in a close game. In the sixth, Joe was called on as a pinch hitter, and came across with another homer, which, although not as long as that of the previous day, enabled him to reach the plate without sliding and bring in two runs ahead of him.

Two homers in two consecutive days were not common enough to pass without notice, and the Pittsburgh sporting writers began to feature Joe in their headlines. There was a marked increase in the attendance on the third day when Joe was slated to pitch. On that day he "made monkeys" of the Pittsburgh batters, and on the two turns at bat when he was permitted to hit made a single and a three-bagger. In two other appearances at bat, the Pittsburgh pitcher deliberately passed him, at which even the Pittsburgh crowd expressed their displeasure by jeers.

On the final day, Markwith was given a chance

to redeem himself, and pitched an airtight game. But Hooper of the Pittsburghs was also at his best, and with the game tied in the ninth Joe again cracked out a homer to the right field bleachers, his third home run in four days!

Markwith prevented further scoring by the enemy, and the game went into the Giants' winning column.

"Four straight from the league leaders," McRae chuckled happily. "The break in the luck has come at last."

CHAPTER XIV

A DELIGHTFUL SURPRISE

"WELL, we wound up the trip in a blaze of glory, anyway," remarked Jim to Baseball Joe, as they sat in the Pullman coach that was carrying them and the rest of the team back to New York.

"Yes, and we just saved our bacon by doing it," replied Joe. "Those last four games gave us eight out of fifteen for the trip. Not so awfully bad for a team on a trip, and yet not good enough to win the championship. But even at that I guess McRae won't supplant us with a team from the old ladies' home," he added, with a laugh.

"We've got a long series of games on the home grounds now," put in Larry, the optimist. "We'll show these other fellows how the game ought to be played. Just watch us climb."

"Here's hoping you're right," chimed in Burkett. "A slice of the World Series money this year would look mighty good to me."

"That's looking pretty far ahead," said Curry. "Still, if Joe keeps up the batting he's been showing us in Pittsburgh, I'll bet we cop the flag."

"That may be just a flash in the pan," cautioned Joe. "I may have had just a few good days when everything broke just right for me. I'm a pitcher, not a batter."

"Not a batter, eh?" remarked Larry, in feigned surprise. "How surprised Dawley and Hooper and the other Pittsburgh pitchers will be to hear that. They seemed to think you could pickle the pill all right."

The players found the baseball circles of New York in a ferment of interest and excitement over the team. There had been considerable despondency over the poor showing of the Giants in the first three series they had played on the trip. But the four rattling victories they had gained over Pittsburgh had redeemed them in the minds of their followers, and hopes for the pennant had revived.

But the one thing that obscured everything else was the tremendous batting that Joe had done in that last series. The sporting columns of the newspapers had headlines like: "The New Batting Star;" "A Rival to Kid Rose;" "Is There to Be a New Home-Run King?" and "The Colossus of Swat." Joe found his footsteps dogged by reporters eager to get interviews telling how he did it. Moving picture operators begged the privilege of taking him in all positions—as he gripped his bat—the way he stood at the plate—as he

drew back for his swing. Illustrated weekly papers had full page pictures of him. Magazines offered him large sums for articles signed with his name. He found himself in the calcium light, holding the center of the stage, the focus of sporting interest and attention.

Joe was, of course, pleased at the distinction he had won, and yet at the same time he was somewhat uneasy and bewildered. He was not especially irked at the attention he was attracting. That had already become an old story as to his pitching. He was hardened to reporters, to being pointed out in the streets, to having a table at which he happened to be dining in a restaurant or hotel become the magnet for all eyes while whispers went about as to who he was. That was one of the penalties of fame, and he had become used to it.

But hitherto his reputation had been that of a great pitcher, and in his own heart he knew he could sustain it. The pitching box was his throne, and he knew he could make good. But he was somewhat nervous about the acclamations which greeted his batting feats. He was not at all sure that he could keep it up. He had never thought of himself as any more than an ordinary batter. He knew that as a pitcher he was not expected to do much batting, and so he had devoted most of his training to perfecting himself in the pitching

art. Now he found himself suddenly placed on a pedestal as a Batting King. Suppose it were, as he himself had suggested, merely a flash in the pan. It would be rather humiliating after all this excitement to have the public find out that their new batting idol was only an idol of clay after all.

He confided some of his apprehension to Jim, but his chum only laughed at him.

"Don't worry a bit over that, old man," Jim reassured him. "I only wish I were as sure of getting a million dollars as I am that you've got the batting stuff in you. You've got the eye, you've got the shoulders, you've got the knack of putting all your weight into your blow. You're a natural born batter, and you've just waked up to it."

"But this is only the beginning of the season," argued Joe. "The pitchers haven't yet got into their stride. By midsummer they'll be burning them over, and then more than likely I'll come a cropper."

"Not a bit of it," Jim affirmed confidently. "You won't face better pitching anywhere than we stacked up against in Pittsburgh, and you made all those birds look like thirty cents. They had chills and fever every time you came to the bat."

The matter was not long left in doubt. In the games that followed Joe speedily proved that the Pittsburgh outburst was not a fluke. Home runs rained from his bat in the games with the Brook-

lyns, the Bostons and the Phillies. And when the Western teams came on for their invasion of the East, they had to take the same medicine. All pitchers looked alike to him. Of course he had his off days when all he could get was a single, and sometimes not that. Once in a long while he went out on strikes, and the pitcher who was lucky or skilful enough to perform that feat hugged it to his breast as a triumph that would help him the next season in demanding a rise in salary. But these occasions were few and far between. The newspapers added a daily slab to their sporting page devoted to Joe's mounting home run record, giving the dates, the parks and the pitchers off whom they were made. And there was hardly a pitcher in the league whose scalp Joe had not added to his rapidly growing collection.

In the business offices of the city, in restaurants, at all kinds of gathering places, the daily question changed. Formerly it had been: "Will the Giants win to-day?" Now it became: "Will Baseball Joe knock out another homer?"

And the fever showed itself in the attendance at the Polo Grounds. Day by day the crowds grew denser. Soon they were having as many spectators at a single game as they had formerly looked for at a double-header. The money rolled into the ticket offices in a steady stream, and the owners and manager of the club wore the "smile

that won't come off." The same effect was noted in all the cities of the circuit. The crowds turned out not so much to see the Giants play as to see if Baseball Joe would knock another home run. Joe Matson had become the greatest drawing card of the circuit. If this kept up, it would mean the most prosperous season the League had ever known. For the Giants' owners alone, it meant an added half million dollars for the season. Already, with not more than a third of the games played, they had taken in enough to pay all expenses for the year, and were "on velvet" for the rest of the season.

Nothing in all this turned Joe's head. He was still the same modest, hardworking player he had always been. First and all the time he worked for the success of his team. Already the Giants' owners had voluntarily added ten thousand dollars to his salary, and he was at present the most highly paid player in his League. He knew that next year even this would be doubled, if he kept up his phenomenal work. But he was still the same modest youth, and was still the same hail fellow well met, the pal and idol of all his comrades.

What delighted Baseball Joe far more than any of his triumphs was the information contained in a letter he wore close to his heart that Mabel was coming on to New York with her brother Reggie

for a brief stay on her way to her home in Goldsboro. They had been in almost daily correspondence, and their affection had deepened with every day that passed. Jim also had been equally assiduous and equally happy, and both players were counting the days that must elapse before the wedding march would be played at the end of the season.

Luck was with Joe when, in company with Jim, he drove to the station to meet Mabel and Reggie. The rain was falling in torrents. Ordinarily that would have been depressing. But to-day it meant that there would be no game and that he could count on having Mabel to himself with nothing to distract his attention.

Jim was glad on his friend's account, but nevertheless was unusually quiet for him.

"Come out of your trance, old boy," cried Joe, slapping him jovially on the knee.

Jim affected to smile.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking about," charged Joe. "You're jealous because I'm going to see Mabel and you're not going to see Clara. But cheer up, old man. The next time we strike Chicago we'll both run down to Riverside for a visit. Then you'll have the laugh on me, for you'll have Clara all to yourself while Mabel will be in Goldsboro."

Jim tried to find what comfort he could from

the prospect, but the Chicago trip seemed a long way off.

They reached the station ahead of time and walked up and down impatiently. The rain and wet tracks had detained the train a little, but at length its giant bulk drew into the station. They scanned the long line of Pullmans anxiously. Then Joe rushed forward with an exclamation of delight as he saw Reggie descend holding out his hand to assist Mabel—Mabel, radiant, starry-eyed, a vision of loveliness.

Jim had followed a little more slowly to give Joe time for the first greeting. But his steps quickened and his eyes lighted up with rapture as behind Mabel Joe's sister Clara came down the steps, sweet as a rose, and with a look in her eyes as she caught sight of Jim that made that young man's heart lose a beat.

CHAPTER XV

AN EVENING RIDE

THERE was a hubbub of delighted and incoherent exclamations as the young people greeted each other with all their heart in their eyes. Of course in the crowded station the greetings could not be just what the boys—and the girls, too—desired, but those would come later. Reggie too came in for warm handshakes.

“My word!” he exclaimed, as he smiled affably upon them all, “you folks seem glad to see one another. I’ll just slip over and look after the luggage.”

They spared him without any regret at all. Indeed, it is doubtful if they even heard him. Joe was saying things to Mabel in an undertone, and Jim was doing the same thing to Clara. What they said was their own affair, but it seemed eminently satisfactory to all concerned.

When at last they had come somewhat to their senses, Joe poked Jim in the ribs.

“Some surprise, old man!” he remarked mischievously.

"Surprise!" repeated Jim. "It's Paradise. It's heaven. Don't tell me I'm going to wake up and find it all a dream. And you knew this all the time, you old rascal, and didn't let me in on it."

"Just a little scheme that Mabel and I cooked up," laughed Joe happily. "I thought Sis might like to come on and take a look at her only brother."

"Brother," mimicked Mabel saucily. "Don't flatter yourself. You won't be looked at much while Jim's around."

Clara flushed and laughed in protest. Joe, however, did not seem disturbed at the prospect. As long as Mabel looked at him the way she was looking now, he had nothing more to ask.

A taxicab whirled them up to the pretty suite that Joe had reserved for the girls in a hotel. There were two rooms in the suite, and it was surprising how quickly Joe and Mabel took possession of one of them, while Jim and Clara found the other one much preferable. They had so much to say to each other that required no audience. Reggie, who had an adjoining room, took himself off on the plea of an engagement that would keep him till luncheon time, and the happy young people had a long delightful morning to themselves.

"Oh, I'm so proud of you, Joe," Mabel assured him, among many other things. "You're making

such a wonderful record. You don't know how I read and treasure all the things the papers are saying about you. They give you more space than they give the President of the United States."

"You mustn't make too much of it, honey," Joe replied. "I'm in luck just now; but if I should have a slump the same people that cheer me now when I make a homer would be jeering at me when I came to the bat. There's nothing more fickle than the public. One day you're a king and the next you're a dub."

"You'll always be a king," cried Mabel. "Always my king, anyway," she added blushing.

In the meantime Clara and Jim were saying things equally precious to themselves and each other, but of no importance at all to the general public. Jim was surprised and pleased at the intimate acquaintance she had with all the phases of his rapid rise in his profession. She knew quite as well as the rest of the world that Jim already stood in the very front rank of pitchers, second only perhaps to Joe himself, and she had no hesitation in telling him what she thought of him. Sometimes it is not a pleasant thing for a man to know what a woman thinks of him, but in Jim's case it was decidedly different, if his shining face went for anything.

The young people took in a matinee in the afternoon and a musical show, followed by dinner,

in the evening, and all were agreed in declaring it a perfect day.

Jim was slated to pitch the next day and with Clara watching from a box he turned in a perfect game, winning by a score of 1 to 0, the run being contributed by Joe, who turned loose a screaming homer in the sixth. Naturally both young men felt elated.

It was a beautiful summer evening, and they had arranged for an automobile ride out on Long Island. Joe had hired a speedy car, but dispensed with the services of a chauffeur. He himself was an accomplished driver and knew all the roads. A chauffeur would have been only a restraint on their freedom of conversation.

They bowled along over the perfect roads, happy beyond words and at peace with all the world. Mabel was seated in front with Joe, while Jim and Clara occupied the tonneau. All were in the gayest of spirits. Much of the time they talked, but speech and silences were equally sweet.

They had dinner at an excellent inn, about forty miles out of the city. There was a good string band and the young couples had several dances. The evening wore away before they knew it, and it was rather late when they turned their faces cityward.

The car was purring along merrily on a rather lonely stretch of road in the vicinity of Merrick,

when a big car came swiftly up behind them. The driver tooted his horn and Joe drew a little to one side to give the car plenty of room to pass. The car rushed by and lengthened the distance until it was about a hundred yards ahead.

"Seems to be in a hurry," remarked Jim.

"A bunch of joy riders, I suppose," answered Joe. "Hello, what does that mean?"

For the car had suddenly stopped and the driver had swung it across the road, blocking it.

"Something gone wrong with the steering gear," commented Joe. "Looks like a breakdown. Perhaps we can help them."

He slowed up as he drew near the car. The next instant four men jumped out of the car and ran toward them. They had their caps drawn down over their eyes, and each of them carried a leveled revolver.

"Hands up!" commanded their leader, as he covered Joe with his weapon.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ATTACK ON THE ROAD

IN an instant Baseball Joe brought the car to a stop.

But in that instant his brain worked like lightning.

Neither he nor Jim was armed. He must temporize. Resistance at the moment might be fatal. Shooting would result probably in the death of one or more of the party.

Before he had taken his hand from the wheel, he had formed a plan.

The women had screamed and Jim had jumped to his feet.

"Sit down, Jim," said Joe. "Don't you see they have the drop on us. I suppose it's money you want?" he went on coolly, addressing the leader of the gang.

"No," was the unexpected answer. "We're not after money this time. We want a man named Matson."

"I didn't know I was so popular," replied Joe jokingly, though the mention of his name in so

ominous a way had sent a start through him. "My name is Matson, Joe Matson. What do you want of me?"

"Are you giving it to us straight?" asked the leader. "Are you Matson? How many men are there with you anyway?" he went on, peering into the tonneau.

"There are two of us," replied Joe.

"Then get down in the road, both of you," commanded the bandit. "I want to have a look at both of you so that there won't be any mistake. My orders are for the man named Matson. No monkey work now!"

Joe and Jim, inwardly boiling but outwardly cool, got down into the road. As they climbed down, Joe's hand nudged Jim ever so slightly. Jim knew what that meant. It meant to make no move until Joe gave the sign.

"Up with your hands!" ordered the leader curtly. "Bill, frisk them and see if they have guns."

The bandit called Bill ran his hands along their bodies and reported that they were entirely unarmed.

"Now strike a match and let's have a look at their faces," was the next order.

Bill obeyed, and as the light flared up, not only the leader but the rest of the band looked over the young men keenly.

"You're Matson, all right," said the leader to Joe, and the rest acquiesced. "I've seen your picture in the papers many a time, and I've seen you at the Polo Grounds too. All right. You get back in the car," he said to Jim, poking him in the side with his pistol, "and drive off."

"What do you want with me?" asked Joe steadily.

"Oh, we're not going to kill you," replied the leader, with an evil grin. "But," he muttered under his breath so low that only Joe could hear him, "by the time we're through with you, that pitching arm of yours will be out of business. Them's our orders."

"Who gave you those orders?" asked Joe.

"Never you mind who gave them," snarled the bandit. "I've got them, and I'm going——"

He never finished the sentence.

Like lightning Joe's foot shot up and kicked the weapon from the leader's hand. The next instant his fist caught another of the scoundrels a terrific crack on the jaw. The man went down as though he had been hit with an axe. At the same moment Jim's hard right fist smashed into another straight between the eyes. There was the snap of a breaking bone and the man toppled over. The fourth rascal, who had been paralyzed with astonishment, forgot to shoot and started to run, but Jim was on him like a tiger and bore him to the ground,

his hands tightening on his throat until the rascal lay limp and motionless.

In the meantime, the leader, nursing his hurt wrist, had hobbled to the car, whose engine all this time had remained running. Joe made a dash for the car, but the chauffeur put on all speed and darted away into the darkness.

The first task of Joe and Jim was to gather up the weapons of the assailants. The three still lay dazed or unconscious. Under other circumstances, the boys would have waited until the trio had regained their senses. But their first duty now was to the girls, who were half hysterical with fright. Joe took Mabel in his arms, after assuring her again and again in answer to her frantic questions that he was unhurt, and Jim comforted Clara until she had recovered her composure.

They laid the bandits at the side of the road, so that they could not be run over, and then Joe took the wheel and drove on. To the first policeman they saw, Joe reported that he had seen some men who seemed to be hurt, alongside the road, and suggested that they be looked after. But he said nothing about the attempted holdup. Then he sped on, and soon they were in the precincts of the city.

The girls in their alarm had failed to gather the true significance of the affair. To them it was

like a confused dream. Their general impression was that a holdup had been attempted for the purposes of robbery. Still Mabel did remember that they had asked specifically for Matson.

"Why was it that they asked for you especially, Joe?" she asked, snuggling closely to the arm that had so stoutly done its work that night. "Why was it?"

"How do I know, honey?" answered Joe. "Perhaps," he said jokingly, "they had heard of my increase in salary and thought I was rolling in money. Sometimes you know they kidnap a man, make him sign a check and then hold him prisoner until they cash it. No knowing what such rascals may do."

"Whatever it was, they've lost all interest in the matter now," said Jim, with a laugh, as he thought of the discomfited bandits by the roadside and the fleeing leader in the automobile.

Both Joe and Jim made light of it to the girls and laughed away their fears until they had seen them safely to their hotel. But later on two very sober and wrathful young men sat in their own room discussing the holdup.

Joe had told Jim what the bandit leader had said about putting his pitching arm out of business, and his friend was white with anger.

"The scoundrels!" he ejaculated. "That meant that they would have twisted your arm until they

had snapped the tendons or pulled it from its socket and crippled you for life. If I'd known that when I had my hands on that rascal's throat, I'd have choked the life out of him."

"You did enough," returned Joe. "As it is they got a pretty good dose. I know I cracked the leader's wrist, and I heard a bone snap when you smashed that other fellow. Gee, Jim, you hit like a pile driver."

"No harder than you did," replied Jim. "That fellow you clipped in the jaw was dead to the world before he hit the ground."

"After all, those fellows were merely tools," mused Joe thoughtfully. "Did you hear the leader say that he had his orders? Who gave him those orders? If only the girls hadn't been there, I'd have trussed the rascals up, waited until they had got their senses back, and then put them through the third degree until I'd found out the name of their employer. But I wouldn't for the world have the girls know what those scoundrels were up to. They'd never have a happy moment. They'd worry themselves to death. We've got to keep this thing absolutely to ourselves."

"All the same, I can guess who the fellow was that employed them," said Jim.

"I think I can come pretty near it, too," affirmed Joe. "In the first place, it was a man who had money. Those fellows wouldn't have taken the

job unless they had been well paid. Then, too, it was somebody who hated me like poison. There are two men who fulfil both of those conditions, and their names are——”

“Fleming and Braxton,” Jim finished for him.

“Exactly,” agreed Joe. “And knowing what I do of the two, I have a hunch that it was Braxton.”

CHAPTER XVII

FALLING BEHIND

“BRAXTON’S the more likely one of the two to use violence—or have it used,” said Jim. “Not but what either one of them would be mean enough to do it. But Braxton has got more nerve than Fleming. Then, too, I happen to know that Fleming has run pretty well through his money, while Braxton is a millionaire. He was pretty hard hit by the failure of the All-Star League to go through last year, but he’s got plenty left. He could give those rascals a thousand, or five thousand if necessary, and never feel it.”

“Speaking of money,” said Joe, “reminds me of something else that may be connected with this case. Do you remember what Reggie told us when he was in Riverside about that fellow in Chicago that was betting great wads of money that the Giants wouldn’t cop the flag? Betting it, Reggie said, as though he had something up his sleeve, as though he were betting on a sure thing. Now what could be a surer thing in a race as close

as this than to cripple the Giant team by robbing it of one of its pitchers? He'd be getting a double satisfaction then—making a pile of money to make up for his losses last season and getting even with me for the thrashing I gave him. That is, of course, if the man is really Braxton.”

“By Jove, I believe you're right!” exclaimed Jim. “Of course that might seem a little far-fetched, if it weren't for the other things that point to the same man. But when you remember that Braxton hails from Chicago, that the anonymous letter had a Chicago postmark, when you recall that somebody tried to injure us in that road blockade the day after I thought I saw Braxton in the training town, and that he was the only one besides ourselves who knew the road we were going to take—when you take all these things together, it seems a dead open-and-shut proposition that Braxton was the man that plotted all this scoundrelism.”

“Some day soon I hope we'll know the truth,” said Joe, “And when that day comes——”

He did not finish the sentence, but his clenched fist and flashing eyes were eloquent.

The next morning the chums went around early, to learn how the girls were feeling after their trying experience. They found them still a little nervous and overwrought, but the society of the boys and the knowledge that they had come through

without injury soon brightened them up, and before long they were their natural selves again. The way the boys had carried themselves in the fight with their assailants made them more than ever heroes in the eyes of those they loved best, and if it had not been for the deeper knowledge they had of the affair, Joe and Jim would have been rather glad it happened.

Reggie, of course, had been told of the holdup and was almost stuttering in his wrath and indignation. But he, like the girls, figured that it had been an attack simply for the purpose of robbery, and the boys were not sure enough of Reggie's discretion to tell him the real facts. They feared that some slip of the tongue on his part might reveal the matter, and they knew that a constant fear would from then on shadow the lives of Mabel and Clara.

In about ten days the next Western trip of the Giants was to begin, and then Clara would return home, while Mabel would go on with Reggie to Goldsboro. But those precious ten days were enjoyed to the full by the young folks. Every hour that the boys could spare from the games was spent in the society of the girls, and every day that a game was played Mabel and Clara occupied a box in the grandstand at the Polo Grounds. The knowledge of the bright eyes that were following their every move put the boys on their mettle, and

they played up to the top of their form. Jim's progress as a boxman was evident with each succeeding game, and Joe covered himself with laurels as both pitcher and batsman. But more than once, after Joe had let down an opposing team with but a few hits, he had an involuntary shudder as he looked at the mighty arm that had scored the victory and thought of it as hanging withered and helpless at his side. And only by the narrowest of margins had he escaped that fate.

The hour of parting came at last, and it was a great wrench to all of them. There were promises on both sides of daily letters, that would serve to bridge the gulf of separation.

The fight for the pennant was waxing hotter and hotter. The Giants and the Pittsburghs were running neck and neck. First one and then the other was at the head in victories won. At times one would forge ahead for a week or two, but the other refused obstinately to be shaken off and would again assume the leadership. Everything promised a ding-dong, hammer-and-tongs finish.

Some of the other teams were still in striking distance, but the first two were really the "class" of the League. The great pitching staff of the Brooklyns had gone to pieces, and it looked as though they were definitely out of the running. The Bostons, after a poor start, had braced and were rapidly improving their average, but they

seemed too far behind to be really dangerous. The unfortunate Phillies were in for the "cellar championship" and did not have a ghost of a chance. Of the Western teams, outside of Pittsburgh, no fear was felt, though the consistent slugging of the Cardinals gave the leaders some uneasy moments. Still, batting alone could not win games, and the Cardinals' pitching staff, though it had some brilliant performers, was surpassed in ability by several teams in the League.

In the American League also a spirited contest was going on. The White Sox, who had usually been a dangerous factor, were out of the running because they had had to build up practically a new team. But the Clevelands were as strong as they had been the year before, and were making a great bid for the flag. Detroit had started out brilliantly, and with its hard hitting outfield was winning many a game by sheer slugging. Washington loomed up as a dangerous contender, and only a little while before had won fifteen straight games.

But the chief antagonist of the Clevelands was the New York Yankee team. For many years they had struggled to win the championship, but though they had come so close at one time that a single wild pitch beat them out of it, they had never been able to gain the coveted emblem.

"It seems at times as though a 'jinx' were pursuing the Yankees," remarked Jim. "But this

year they have got together a rattling good crowd in all departments of the game. Most of all that counts in their hopes, I imagine, is the acquisition of Kid Rose."

Kid Rose was a phenomenal batter of whom every baseball fan in the United States was talking. He had been a pitcher on the Red Sox and had done fine work in the box. It was only after he had been playing some time in that position that he himself, as well as others, began to realize the tremendous strength that resided in his batting arm and shoulders. He was a left handed batter, so that most of his hits went into right field, or rather into the right field bleachers, where they counted as home runs. In one season he accumulated twenty-nine home runs, which was a record for the major leagues.

The Yankee owners made a deal with the Red Sox by which the "Kid" was brought to the New York club at a price larger than had ever been paid for a player. It was a good investment, however, for the newcomer was excelling his home run record of the year before and drew so many people to the parks where he played that a constant golden stream flowed into the strong boxes of the club. He made as many home runs as all the other players of his team together. Now, owing to his work, the Yankees were fighting it out with the Clevelands for the lead, and the

papers were already beginning to talk of the possibility of both championships coming to New York. If this should be the case, the World Series games would probably draw the greatest crowds that had ever witnessed such a contest, and the prize money for the players would undoubtedly be larger than ever before in the history of the game.

Joe and his comrades needed no such spur as this to make them play their best. A strong loyalty to the club marked every player of the team. Still it was not at all an unpleasing thought that the result of winning would add a good many thousand dollars to the salary of every member.

The Giants started out in high hopes on this second Western invasion.

"Sixteen games to be played on this trip, boys," McRae had said to them, as they boarded the train at the Pennsylvania Station. "And out of that sixteen I want at least twelve. Nix on the breaking even stuff. That won't go with me at all. I want to get so far ahead on this trip that we'll be on easy street for the rest of the race."

"Why not cop the whole sixteen, Mac?" asked Larry, with a broad grin.

"So much the better," answered McRae. "But I'm no hog. Give me an average of three out of four in each series and I'll ask for nothing better."

The team started out as though they were going

to give their manager what he wanted. Their first stop this time was Pittsburgh, and here they won the first two games right off the reel. The third, however, was lost by a close margin. In the fourth the Giants' bats got going and they sent three Pirate pitchers to the showers, winning by the one-sided score of eleven to two. So that it was in high spirits that they left the Smoky City for Cincinnati.

Here they met with a rude shock. The Reds were in the midst of one of their winning streaks and were on a hitting rampage. They had the "breaks," too, and cleaned up by taking every game. It was a complete reversal, and the Giants were stunned.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE THROES OF A SLUMP

ROBSON'S round face had lost its usual smile. McRae's was like a thundercloud, and the players evaded him as much as they could. Even Larry was "Laughing Larry" no longer. It was a disgruntled crowd of baseball players that shook the dust of Cincinnati from their feet and started for Chicago.

"Better luck next time," Joe comforted his mates. "After all it's the uncertainty of the game that makes baseball. How many people would have been at the park if they thought their pets didn't have a chance to win?"

"That's all very well," grumbled Curry, "but we ought at least to have had our share of the breaks. We hit the ball hard enough, but every time it went straight to the fielders. They didn't hit any better, but the ball went just out of the reach of our fellows. Talk about fool luck! If those Cincinnati players fell in the water they'd come up with a fish dinner."

"That's just the reason we're due for a change," argued Jim. "We'll get it all back from the Cubs."

But here again there was disappointment. Joe pitched the first game and won in a close fight, although the Cubs tied it up in the ninth and Joe had to win his own game in the eleventh by a homer. But the next two went to Chicago, and in the fourth game, which Jim pitched, the best he could do was to make it a tie, called in the twelfth on account of darkness.

This time it was not luck that gave to the Giants only one game out of three. They had as many of the breaks of the game as their opponents. They simply slumped. One of those mysterious things that come to almost every team once at least in a season had them in its clutches. Perhaps it was overanxiety, perhaps it was a superstitious feeling that a "jinx" was after them, but, whatever it was, it spread through the team like an epidemic. Their fingers were "all thumbs." Their bats had "holes" in them. The most reliable fielders slipped up on easy chances. They booted the ball, or if they got it they threw either too high or too low to first. Double plays became less frequent. Two of the best batters in the team, Larry and Burkett, fell off woefully in their hitting.

In vain McRae raged and stormed. In vain

Robbie begged and pleaded and cajoled. In vain Jim and Joe, who still resisted the infection, sought to stem the tide of disaster. The members of the team with a few exceptions continued to act as if they were in a trance.

McRae did everything in his power to bring about a change. He laid off Willis and Iredell, and put two promising rookies, Barry and Ward, in their places. This added a little speed on the bases to the team, but did not materially add to the batting or fielding, for the rookies were nervous and made many misplays, while they were lamentably short on the "inside stuff" that takes long experience to acquire. He shook up the batting order. But the hits were still few and far between.

St. Louis gave the Giants a sound trouncing in the first game, but in the second the Giants came to life and reversed the score.

Joe was in the box in this contest, and as he came in to the bench in the fourth inning, he noted, sitting in the grandstand, a figure that seemed familiar to him. The man seemed to have seen Baseball Joe at the same time, but he hid himself behind the form of a big man sitting in front of him, so that Joe could not be sure of his identification.

"What were you looking at so steadily, Joe?" inquired Jim, as his friend sat down on the bench

beside him. "Did you by any chance catch sight of the jinx that's been following us?" he continued jokingly.

"Maybe I did, at that," replied Joe. "I could have sworn that I got a glimpse of Bugs Hartley in the grandstand."

"Bugs Hartley?" echoed Jim in surprise. "How could that old rascal have got as far as St. Louis?"

"Beat his way, perhaps," answered Joe. "Of course I'm not dead sure but that I might have been mistaken. And I won't have much time to look for him while I'm in the box. But suppose in the meantime you go down to the coaching line near first. While you're pretending to coach, you can take an occasional look at the grandstand and see if you can pick out Bugs. He's somewhere about the third row near the center. Just where the wire netting is broken."

Jim did as suggested, and studied the grandstand with care. He had only a chance to make an affirmative nod of the head as Joe, the inning ended, went out again to the box, but when he returned after pitching the side out on strikes, Jim told Joe that he was right.

"It's Bugs all right," he said. "I had a good chance to see that ugly mug of his, and there can't be any mistake. But what in thunder can he be doing in St. Louis?"

"Oh, panhandling and drinking himself to death, I suppose," answered Joe carelessly, his mind intent upon the game.

"But how did he get here?" persisted Jim. "I don't like it, old man. It takes money to travel, and I don't think Bugs could hustle up railroad fare to save his life. And if somebody gave him the money to get here, why was it done? I tell you again, Joe, I don't like it."

"Well, perhaps it's just as well we caught sight of him," admitted Joe. "It will help us to keep our eyes open."

In the seventh inning for the Giants, with the score tied at 3 to 3, Larry started a rally for the Giants by lining out a screaming single to right. Denton followed with a hit to short that was too hot for the shortstop to handle. He knocked the ball down, however, and got it to first. Denton had thought the play would be made on Larry, who was already on his way to third. Denton, therefore, had rounded first and started for second, but saw the ball coming and scrambled back to first. There was a grand mixup, but the umpire declared Denton safe.

It was a close play, and the St. Louis team was up in arms in a moment. Some of them, including their manager, rushed to the spot to argue with the umpire. The crowd also was enraged at the decision and began to hoot and howl. One or two

pop bottles were thrown at the umpire, but fell short.

Joe, who was next at bat, had taken his stand at the plate, awaiting the outcome of the argument. Suddenly a bottle, aimed with great skill and tremendous force, came through the broken wire netting, whizzed close by his head, the top of it grazing his ear in passing. If it had hit his head, it would have injured him greatly beyond a doubt.

Joe turned toward the stand and saw a man hastily making his way out toward the entrance. He could only see his back, but he knew at once to whom that back belonged.

"Stop him! Stop him!" he shouted, as he threw aside his bat and rushed toward the stand.

But Jim had already vaulted over the barrier and was rushing through the aisle.

CHAPTER XIX

A CLOSE CALL

THE people in the grandstand had not fully grasped the significance of the cowardly attack, as the attention of most of them was centered upon the dispute at first base. But the shout of Baseball Joe and the rush of Jim through the aisle of the stand had brought them to their feet, and some of them started in pursuit or tried to stop the flying figure of the fugitive.

But this very desire of so many to apprehend him helped in his escape. Men crowded in the aisle, and Jim, who could otherwise have captured him, found himself in the midst of a throng that effectually hindered his progress. He pushed his way through desperately, using his arms and hands to clear a passage, but by the time he arrived at the outer edge, the man had disappeared. Either he had mixed with the enormous crowd or had found his way through one of the numerous exits. In any event, he was not to be seen, and at last Jim, flaming-eyed and dripping with sweat

from his exertions, had to come back empty-handed.

In the meantime, the umpire had asserted his authority at first base, and given the St. Louis players one minute by his watch to resume play. With much muttering and grumbling they obeyed. The decision stood, and Larry was on third, while Denton danced around on first and "kidded" the Cardinal first baseman on the umpire's decision.

Joe again took up his position at the plate, the fairer-minded among the spectators giving him a cheer as he did so, to express their indignation at the dastardly attack that had been made on him. He was somewhat shaken by the close call he had had, and the first two balls were strikes. Then he took a grip on himself, and when the next one came over he smashed a beauty to right. It went for two bases, while Larry scored easily, and Denton by great running and a headlong slide also reached the plate. The next man up sacrificed Joe to third, but there he remained, as the next two batters, despite McRae's adjurations, were not able to bring him in.

The Giants, however, had now broken the tie and had a two-run lead, and although that ended their scoring, it was sufficient, as Joe put on extra steam and mowed down the Cardinals almost as fast as they came to the bat. One hit was made off him for the remainder of the game, but as the

batter got no farther than first there was no damage done.

Joe and Jim did not care to discuss the matter before their mates, and the attack was put down to some rowdy who was sore at the umpire's decision and took that method of showing it. But the two friends knew that it was much more than that.

"Well, what do you think now of my hunch?" demanded Jim, when the chums were alone together. "Was I right when I said I was uneasy about that fellow being in the grandstand?"

"You certainly were, Jim," answered Joe. "It must have been Bugs who threw that bottle. I know at any rate that it was he whom I saw hustling out of the stands. And when I looked at where he had been sitting the seat was empty."

"It was Bugs all right," affirmed Jim with decision. "I saw his face once, when he glanced behind him while he was running. Then, too, only a pitcher could have hurled the bottle with the swiftness and precision that he did. It went nearly as far as the pitcher's box before it struck the ground. Gee! my heart was in my mouth for a second when I saw it go whizzing past your ear. If it had hit you fair and square, it would have been good night."

"It did barely touch me," replied Joe, pointing to a scratch on his ear. "The old rascal hasn't forgotten how to throw. How that fellow must

hate me! And yet I was the best friend that he had on the team."

"He hates you all right," replied Jim. "But it wasn't only his own personal feeling that prompted him to do that thing to-day. That isn't Bugs' way. He'd dope your coffee on the sly. Or he'd throw a stone at your head in a dark street, as he did that time when we'd started on our tour around the world. But to do a thing in the open, as he did to-day, means that he had a mighty big incentive to lay you out. That incentive was probably money. Somebody has put up the cash to send him to St. Louis, and that same somebody has probably promised him a big wad of dough if he could do you up. The chance came to-day, when the fans began to throw bottles at the umpire. He figured that that was the time to get in his work. If he'd been caught, he could have said that he was only one of a good many who did the same thing, and that he had no idea the bottle was going to hit anybody."

"Then you think that Bugs this time was acting as the tool of Braxton, or whoever it is that's trying to put me out of business," remarked Joe.

"Think so!" cried Jim. "I'm sure of it. So many things, all pointing to deliberate purpose, don't happen by accident. The same fellow who hired those auto bandits to cripple you hired Bugs for the same purpose. Lots of people have heard

of the hatred that Bugs has for you. I suppose he's panning you all the time in the joints where he hangs out. This fellow that's after your hide has heard of Bugs and put him on the job. If he can't get you in one way, he's going to try to get you in another. He figures that some time or other one of his schemes will go through. Gee!" he exclaimed, jumping up and pacing the floor, "what would I give just to come face to face with him and have him in a room alone with me for five minutes. Just five minutes! I'd change his face so that his own brother wouldn't know him."

"I hope that job's reserved for me," replied Joe, as his fist clenched. "He'd get a receipt in full for all I owe him."

"In the meantime, what shall we do about Bugs?" asked Jim anxiously. "He ought to be put in jail. It isn't right that a man who's tried to cripple another should be at large."

"No," agreed Joe, "it isn't. But I don't see just what we can do about it. The chances are ten to one against his being found. Even if he were, nobody could be found probably who saw him actually throw the bottle. We didn't ourselves, though we feel absolutely certain that he did. He could explain his leaving by saying that he was taken ill and had to leave. Then, too, if he were arrested, we'd have to stay here and prosecute him, and we can't stay away from the team. Be-

sides the whole thing would get in the papers, and Mabel and Clara and all the folks would have heart failure about it. No, I guess we'll have to keep quiet about it."

"I suppose we will," admitted Jim reluctantly. "But some day this scoundrel who's hounding you will be caught in the open. And I'm still hoping for that five minutes!"

CHAPTER XX

SPEEDING UP

ST. LOUIS was in good form on the following day, and a perfect deluge of hits came from their bats. The Giants, too, had a good hitting day, and the fans who like to see free batting had their desire satisfied to the full. And their pleasure was all the greater because the home team had the best of the duel, and came out on top by a score of 17 to 12.

Jim was in the box on the next day, and by superb pitching had the St. Louis sluggers hitting like a kindergarten team. They simply could not solve him. His team mates had scarcely anything to do, and only by the narrowest of margins did he miss turning the Cardinals back without a hit. One hit narrowly escaped the fingers of the second baseman, as he leaped in the air for it. But it did escape him, and counted for the only hit made by the St. Louis in the game. It was a magnificent exhibition and wound up a disastrous trip in a blaze of glory.

Still it could not be denied that the trip had put a big dent in the Giants' aspirations for the pennant. Instead of the twelve games out of sixteen that McRae had asked for, they had only turned in six victories. It was the most miserable record that the Giants had made for years.

"And we call ourselves a good road team!" snorted Curry in disgust, as they settled down in the Pullman for the long ride back from St. Louis to New York. "A bunch of school girls could have done better work."

"Luck was against us," ventured Larry. "It sure was against us."

"Luck, nothing!" exclaimed Curry. "We simply fell down, and fell down hard. The whole League is laughing at us. Look at the way the other Eastern teams held up their end. The Brooklyns copped ten games, the Bostons got eleven, and the Phillies pulled down seven. We ought to sneak back into New York on a freight train instead of riding in Pullmans."

"I guess there won't be any band at the station to meet us," remarked Joe. "But after all, any team is liable to have a slump and play like a lot of dubs. Let's hope we've got all the bad playing out of our systems. From now on we're going to climb."

"That's the way to talk," chimed in Jim. "Of course we can't deny that we've stubbed our toes

on this trip. But we know in our heart that we've got the best team in the League. We've got the Indian sign on all of them. The fans that are roasting us now will be shouting their heads off when we get started on our winning streak. Remember, boys, it's a long worm that has no turning."

There was a general laugh at this, and the spirits of the party lightened a little. But not all of the gloom was lifted.

The prediction that their reception in New York would be rather frosty was true. Such high hopes had been built on the result of this trip that the reaction was correspondingly depressing. And what made the Giants feel the change of attitude the more keenly was the fact that while they had been doing so poorly, the Yankees at home had been going "like a house afire." They had taken the lead definitely away from the Clevelands, and it did not seem as though there was any team in their League that could stop them. New York was quite sure that it was going to have one championship team. But it was quite as certain that it was not going to have two. That hope had gone glimmering.

Both teams were occupying the Polo Grounds for the season, while the new park of the Yankees was being completed. The schedule therefore had been arranged so that while one of the teams was

playing at home the other was playing somewhere out of town.

Thus on the very day the Giants reached home the Yankees were starting out on their trip to other cities. They went away in the glory of victory. The Giants came home in the gloom of defeat.

The change of sentiment was visible in the first home game that the Giants played. On the preceding day, at their last game, the Yankees had played before a crowd of twenty-five thousand. The first game of the Giants drew scarcely more than three thousand. Many of these were the holders of free season passes, others, like the reporters, had to be there, while the rest were made up of the chronic fans who followed the Giants through thick and thin. There was no enthusiasm, and even the fact that the Giants won did not dispel the funereal atmosphere.

And then the Giants began to climb!

At first the process did not attract much attention. The public was so thoroughly disheartened by the downfall of their favorites in the West, that they took it for granted that they were out of the running for the pennant. Of course it was assumed that they would finish in the first division—it was very seldom that a New York team could not be depended on to do that—and that by some kind of miracle it might be possible to finish

second. But there was very little consolation in that. New York wanted a winner or nothing. If the Giants could not fly the championship flag at the Polo Grounds, nobody cared very much whether they came in second or eighth or anywhere between.

The first team to visit the Polo Grounds was the Bostons. They had greatly improved their game since the beginning of the season, and were even thought to have a look-in for the flag. They chuckled to themselves at the thought that they would catch the Giants in the slump that had begun out West and press them still deeper in the direction of the cellar. At first they thought they might even make a clean sweep. They lost the first game, but only by reason of a muff of an easy fly that let in two unearned runs in the sixth. That of course disposed of the clean sweep idea, but still, three out of four would do. But when they lost the second game also, their jubilation began to subside. Now the best they could hope for was an even break. But again they lost, and the climax was put to their discomfiture when the Giants simply walked away with the fourth game by a score of 10 to 0.

But even with this series of four in a row captured by the Giants, the public refused to enthuse. It might have been only a flash in the pan. It is true that the sporting writers were beginning to

sit up and take notice. Most of their time hitherto had been spent in advising McRae through the columns of their paper how he might strengthen his team for next year. The present season of course was past praying for. Yet there was a distinct chirking up on the part of the scribes, although they carefully refrained from making any favorable predictions that afterward they might be sorry for. They would wait awhile and see. Besides, the Brooklyns were coming next, and they had usually found it easy to defeat the Giants. If the Giants could hold the men from over the big bridge to an even break, it might mean a great deal.

The Brooklyns came, saw and—were conquered. Four times in succession they went down before superb pitching and heavy batting. Four times they called on their heavy sluggers and their best boxmen, but the Giants rode over them roughshod. The sporting writers sat up and rubbed their eyes. Was this the same team that had come home forlorn and bedraggled after their last trip? Had the Giants really come to life? Was the pennant still a possibility?

By this time the public had begun to wake up. The stands at the Polo Grounds no longer looked like a desert. The crowds began to pack the subway cars on their way up to the grounds. Everywhere the question was beginning to be asked:

“What do you think of the Giants? Have they still got a chance?”

It was the Phillies' turn next, and they had also to bend the knee. The Giants took them into camp as easily as they had the Braves and the Dodgers. And to rub it in, two of the games were shutouts.

Twelve games in a row, and the Giants tearing through the other teams like so many runaway horses!

CHAPTER XXI

THE WINNING STREAK

THE Giants were in for a winning streak, and New York City promptly went baseball mad!

Now there was no question of filling the grounds. It was rather a question of getting there early enough to secure seats.

The Polo Grounds could accommodate thirty-five thousand, and again and again that number was reached and exceeded. The great amphitheatre was a sea of eager faces. Fans stood in hundreds in the rear of the upper grandstands. The lower stand too was filled to overflowing, and the bleachers were packed. It was astonishing how many business men closed their rolltop desks with a bang on those summer afternoons. Young and old alike were wild to be at the games and see the Giants add one more to their rapidly mounting list of victories.

Thirteen—fourteen—fifteen—sixteen! Were the Giants ever going to be stopped? If so, who was going to stop them? The Western teams

were coming now and the St. Louis team had left their scalps in the Giant's wigwam. Chicago was next in line. Could they stop the Giants in their mad rush for the flag?

They could not, although they tried desperately, and Brennan, their resourceful manager, used all the cunning and guile that his long experience had taught him. The Giants tamed the Cubs with a thoroughness that left nothing to be desired from a New York point of view. And now the string of victories had mounted to twenty.

Old records were got out and furbished up. It was found that once before, when Markwith and Hughson were in their prime, the New Yorks had won twenty-six games in a row. Could they repeat? Could they beat their own record that had been hung up so long for other teams to aim at? That was the question that absorbed public interest, not only in New York, but in baseball circles all over the country.

The reason for this phenomenal spurt of the Giants, it was recognized, could be found in two chief factors. One was the wonderful work being done by Joe both as a pitcher and a batter. The other was the marvelous advance that had been made by Jim as a twirler.

Joe had never had such complete mastery of the ball as he was showing this season. Even the pitching he had done the previous year, in the

World Series between the Giants and the Sox, paled in comparison with what he was doing now. His control was something almost magical. It was such a rarity for him to give a base on balls that when it happened it was specially noted by the sporting writers. He worked the corners of the plate to perfection. He mixed up his fast ones with slow teasers that made the opposing batsmen look ridiculous as they broke their backs reaching for them. His slants and twists and hops and curves had never been so baffling. It was fast getting to the point where the other teams were half beaten as soon as they saw Joe pick up his glove and go into the box.

But it was not even his pitching, great as it was, that held the worshiping attention of the crowds. It was the home run record that he was piling up in such an amazing fashion that already he was rated by many the equal of the wonderful Kid Rose. That wonderful eye of his had learned to time the ball so accurately as it came up to the plate that the bat met it at precisely the hundredth part of a second when it did the most good. Then all his mighty arm and shoulder leaned on the ball and gave it wings. Almost every other game now saw a home run chalked up to his credit. In three games of the winning streak he had made two home runs in a single game. It was common talk that he was out to tie the record of Ed Dele-

hanty, the one-time mighty slugger of the Phillies, who in the years of long ago had hung up a record of four homers in a game. He had not done it yet, but there was still time before the season closed.

More still would have gone to his credit had not the opposing pitchers become so afraid of him that they would not let him hit the ball. Again and again when he came to the bat, the catcher would stand away off to the side and the pitcher would deliberately send over four balls, so wide that Joe could not possibly reach them without stepping out of the box. This was a mighty disappointment to the crowds, half of whom had come with no other object in view than to see Joe smash out a homer. They would jeer and taunt the pitcher for his cowardice in fearing to match his slants against Joe's bat, but the practice continued nevertheless.

Even this, however, was not a total loss to the Giants. It put Joe on first anyway, and counted at least for as much as a single would have done. And Joe was so fleet of foot on the bases that McRae once said jokingly that he would have to have detectives on the field to keep him from stealing so many bags. Many a base on balls thus given to Joe out of fear for his mighty bat was eventually turned into a run that helped to win the game.

One morning when Joe, with the rest of the

Giant team, was going out on the field for practice, his eye caught sight of a long white streak of kalsomine that ran up the right field wall to the top, behind the bleachers.

"What's the idea?" he asked, turning to Robbie, who was close beside him.

"Don't you really know, you old fence-breaker?" asked Robbie, a smile breaking over his jovial face.

"Blest if I do," answered Joe.

"Well, I'll tell you," answered Robbie. "The fact is that you've got into such a habit of knocking the ball into the right field stands—mighty good habit, too, if you ask me—that the umpires have asked us to paint this line so that they can see whether the hit is fair or foul. The ordinary hit they can tell easy enough. But yours are so far out that they have to have especial help in judging them. It's the first time it's had to be done for any hitter in the history of the game. Some compliment, what?"

But Joe's work, wonderful as it was, would not alone have started and maintained the Giants' winning streak. No one man, however great, can carry a whole team on his shoulders. The next most important element was the pitching that Jim was showing. It was only second in quality to that turned in by Joe himself. Jim was a natural ball player, and his close association and friend-

ship with Joe had taught him all the fine points of the game. He had learned the weaknesses of opposing batters. He knew those who would bite at an outcurve and those to whom a fast high one was poison; those who would offer at the first ball and those who would try to wait him out; those who would crowd the plate and those who would flinch when he wound the ball around their necks. He had a splendid head on his shoulders and a world of power in his biceps; and those two things go far to make a winning combination.

Another element of strength was the return of Hughson to the team and his ability to take his regular turn in the box. His arm still hurt him, and it was beginning to be evident that he would never again be the Hughson of old. But his skill and knowledge of the game and the batters was so great that it more than atoned for the weakness of his pitching arm. His control was as wonderful as ever, and he nursed his arm as much as possible. He did not attempt to do much striking out, as that would have been too severe a strain. More and more he let the batsmen hit the ball, and depended upon the eight men behind him to back him up. Often he would go through an inning this way and the three put outs would be made by the infield on grounders and the outfielders on flies. But once let a man get on first and the "Old Master" would tighten up and prevent scoring.

By thus favoring his arm, he was able to turn in his share of the victories.

Markwith also had a new lease of life, and was winging them over as in the days when he had been without question the best port side flinger in the League.

In fact the pitching staff was at the height of its form and had never been going better. And the rest of the team, without exception, was playing great ball. There was not a cripple on the list. Willis and Iredell had been restored to their positions at third and short respectively, and were playing the best ball of their careers. With Larry at second and Burkett at first, they formed a stonewall infield that seldom let anything get away from them. They made hair-raising stops and dazzling double plays, gobbling up grounders on either side, spearing high liners that were ticketed for singles, and played like supermen. The outfielders had caught the spirit of enthusiasm that pervaded the team, and were making what seemed like impossible catches. Add to this that the team members were batting like fiends and running bases like so many ghosts, and the reason for the winning streak becomes apparent. The Giants were simply playing unbeatable ball.

So the Cincinnati found when the time came for their heads to drop into the basket. That series was sweet revenge for the Giants, who had

not forgotten the beating the Reds had given them on their last swing around the circuit.

Twenty-one — twenty-two — twenty-three — twenty-four. Two more games to tie their own previous record. Three more to beat it. Would they do it?

Many shook their heads. On the mere law of averages, a break for the Giants was now due. The team had been under a fearful strain. Such phenomenal work could not last forever.

Besides, the severest test was now at hand. The Pittsburghs were coming. The Smoky City boys had been playing great ball themselves. They had won nineteen games out of the last twenty-four, and the margin of seven games that they had had when the Giants began their streak still kept them in the lead by two games. They had boasted that they would break the Giants' streak as soon as they struck New York.

The time had come to make good their boast. Would they do it?

CHAPTER XXII

STRIVING FOR MASTERY

IT was Jim's turn to go on the mound in the first game with the Pittsburghs, and in the practice work before the game he showed that he was keyed up for his work. For so comparatively young a pitcher, he might well have been a bit nervous at facing so redoubtable a team before the immense crowd that had gathered to see whether or not the Giants' winning streak was doomed to be broken. But there was no trace of it in his manner, and McRae, looking him over, concluded that there was no reason to change his selection.

His confidence was justified. Jim that afternoon was at as high a point of pitching form as he had ever reached in his career. He pitched a masterly game and held the Pirate sluggers to four hits. His support was all that could be desired, and some of the stops and throws of his comrades bordered on the miraculous. The Giants came out at the big end of the score, their tally being three to the solitary run scored by their opponents.

"Twenty-five!" chuckled Joe, as he slapped his friend on the back, when the Pirates had been turned back in their half of ninth. "Jim, you're a lulu! You had those fellows rolling over and playing dead."

"I guess we had all the breaks," returned Jim, smiling modestly.

"Nothing of the kind," disclaimed Joe. "If anything, they had whatever breaks there were. It was simply a case of dandy pitching. You had them buffaloed."

"Only one more game to go before we tie our own record," said Jim. "Gee, Joe, I wish you were going to pitch to-morrow. We're just in sight of the Promised Land. That will be the most important game of all."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Joe. "It will be something to tie the record, but I want to break it. Day after to-morrow will be the big day. That is, if we win to-morrow, and I think we shall. It's Markwith's turn to go in, and he's going fine. The Pittsburghs aren't any too good against left-handed pitchers, anyway."

But whatever the alleged weakness of the Pirates against southpaws, they showed little respect for Markwith's offerings on the next day. They had on their batting clothes and clouted the ball lustily. Only phenomenal fielding on the part of the Giants kept the score down, and again and

again Markwith was pulled out of a hole by some dazzling bit of play when a run seemed certain. Still he worried through until the first part of the eighth. At that time the score was five to four in favor of the visitors. The Giants had been batting freely, but not quite as hard as the Pirates.

In the eighth, Markwith was plainly beginning to wobble in his control. He passed two men in quick succession. That was enough for McRae, and Joe, who had been warming up at the right of the grandstand, was sent into the box.

The Pirates' scoring stopped then and there. Astley, who was at the bat, fanned on three successive strikes. Brown hit to the box and Joe made a lightning throw to Larry at second, who relayed it to first for a sparkling double play, putting out the side.

The Giants' half of the eighth was scoreless. All the Pittsburghs had to do now was to hold them down for one more inning, and the winning streak would be broken.

Joe made short work of the visitors in their last inning and the Giants came in for their final half.

Willis was the first man up. He made a savage lunge at the first ball pitched, but caught it on the under side, and it went up directly over the plate. Jenkins the Pittsburgh catcher, did not have to move from his tracks to gather it in.

Larry sent a fierce low liner to Baskerville at short, who made a magnificent catch, picking it off his shoe tops. Two out, and the crowd fairly groaned as the winning streak seemed at last about to be broken.

All hopes were now pinned on Denton. All he could do, however, was to dribble a slow one to the box. It seemed a certain out, and nine times out of ten would have been. But the Pittsburgh pitcher, in running in on it, snatched it up so hurriedly that it fell out of his hand. He recovered it in an instant and shot it to first. But that fumble had been fatal, and Denton by a headlong slide reached first before the ball.

A tremendous roar arose from the stands, and the people who had started to leave sat down suddenly and sat down hard.

In the Giants' dugout, all was excitement and animation. McRae ran down to first to coach Denton. Robbie rushed over to Joe, who was next in turn and had already picked up his bat.

"For the love of Pete, Joe," he begged, "paste the old apple. Show them again what you've been showing us all along. Kill the ball! Just once, Joe, just once! You can do it. One good crack, and you'll save the winning streak."

"I'll do my best," was Joe's reply.

Frantic adjurations of the same nature were showered on Joe as he took up his position at the

plate. Then there was a great silence, as the crowd fairly held their breath.

But the crafty Pittsburgh pitcher was to be reckoned with. He had no mind to see the game go glimmering just at the moment it seemed to be won. He signaled to his catcher and deliberately pitched two balls wide of the plate. It was evident that he was going to give Joe his base on balls and take a chance with Mylert, the next batter.

But the best laid plans sometimes miscarry. The third ball he pitched did not go as wide of the plate as he had meant it should. Joe sized it up, saw that he could reach it, and swung for it with all his might.

There was a crack like that of a rifle as the bat met the ball and sent it mounting ever higher and higher toward the right field wall. It seemed as though it were endowed with wings. On it went in a mighty curve and landed at last in the top-most row of the right field seats. There it was pocketed by a proud and happy fan, while Joe, sending in Denton ahead of him, jogged easily around the bases to the home plate. The game was won! The winning streak was saved! The Giants had tied their record, which had stood untouched for so many years!

The scene in the stands and bleachers beggared description. Roar after roar went up, while the crazy spectators threw their straw hats into the air

and scattered them by scores over the field. The Polo Grounds had been transformed into a madhouse, but differing from other insane asylums in that all the inmates were happy. All, that is, except the Pirates and their supporters, who thought unspeakable things as they saw the game in a twinkling torn from their grasp.

Joe's only escape from his enthusiastic well-wishers lay in flight, and he made a bee line for the clubhouse. He got inside not a moment too soon. For a long time afterward a great crowd hung about the entrance, waiting for him to reappear, and it was only by slipping out of a back entrance that he eluded them.

The old record had been tied. Could it be beaten?

CHAPTER XXIII

HOLDING THEM DOWN

BASEBALL circles had rarely been more deeply stirred than by the issue of the game, by winning which the Giants had tied their record. It was not merely the winning, but the sensational way in which Baseball Joe's home run had turned the scales in the last minute and snatched victory from defeat that excited the fans.

But now that the record was tied, would the Giants be able to hang up a new one? That was the question on every lip, the question whose discussion filled column after column of the sporting pages of the newspapers.

All agreed that the Giants had been lucky to win. If it had not been for the error of the pitcher on Denton's slow dribble, they would have lost. But it was conceded that it was not luck that had secured that mighty home run that Joe had hammered out to the bleachers. That was ball playing. That was muscle. That was determination. Once again his cool head and quick eye

and powerful arm had shown that the game was not over until the last man was out.

It was Joe's turn to pitch, and it was upon that fact more than anything else that the vast crowd that stormed the Polo Grounds relied for annexing the twenty-seventh game. The Pittsburghs too were holding out their star pitcher, Hooper, for that critical game, and it was certain that they would put forth superhuman efforts to win.

In more senses than one, the game was an important one. The last two victories of the Giants had wiped out the lead that the Pirates had had over them, and the two teams were now on even terms in games won and lost for the season, so that the Pirates had a double incentive to win. If they took the game they would not only prevent the Giants from breaking their own record for a winning streak, but would also once more stand at the head of the League.

"It's up to you, Joe," McRae said, just before the bell rang for the game to begin. "How are you feeling? Are you tired at all from pitching those last two innings yesterday?"

"Not a bit tired," replied Joe promptly. "That little work yesterday was just the practice I needed to get into form. I'm feeling as fine as silk."

"You look it," said the manager admiringly, as his eye took in the strong, lithe figure, the bronzed face and clear eyes of his star pitcher. "Well go

in now Joe and eat them up. Hooper will be in the box for them, and I'm not denying that he's some pitcher. But he never saw the day that you couldn't run rings around him. Go in and win."

It was evident from the start that there would be no such free hitting that day as there had been the day before. Both boxmen were in superb form, and by the time the first inning for each side was over, the spectators had settled down to witness a pitcher's duel.

Hooper was a spitball artist, and his moist slants kept the Giants guessing in the early part of the game. But while he depended chiefly on this form of delivery, he had other puzzlers in his assortment, and he mixed them up in a most deceptive manner. In the first three innings he had four strike-outs to his credit, and when the Giants did connect with the ball it went up into the air and into the hands of some waiting fielder. His control of the slippery sphere also was excellent, and he issued no passes.

In the fourth inning, the Giants began to nibble at his offerings. Curry rapped one out to right for the first single of the game. Iredell was robbed of a hit by a great jumping catch of O'Connor, who speared the ball with his gloved hand. Burkett lined out a two-bagger that carried Curry easily to third, but in trying to stretch the hit, he was caught by Ralston's magnificent throw.

to the plate. Burkett in the meantime had made a dash for third, but thought better of it, and scrambled back to second just in time. The next man up went out from short to first and the inning ended without scoring. But the Giants had proved to themselves that Hooper could be hit, and it was with renewed confidence that they took their places in the field.

Joe in the meantime was mowing his opponents down with the regularity of a machine. His mighty arm swung back and forth like a piston rod. He had never cared for the spitball, as he knew that sooner or later it destroyed a pitcher's effectiveness. But in his repertoire of curves and slants he had weapons far more deadly. His fast straight one whizzed over the plate like a bullet. He mixed these up with a slow, dipping curve that the Pirates endeavored in vain to solve. Only with the head of the Pittsburgh batting order did he at times resort to the fadeaway. That he kept in reserve for some moment when danger threatened. Twice in the first five innings he set down the side on strikes, and not a man reached first on balls. It was wonderful pitching, and again and again Joe was forced to doff his cap to the cheers of the crowd, as he came into the bench.

In the sixth inning, the Giants got busy. Wheeler lashed out a whale of a three-bagger to left. Willis laid down a neat sacrifice, bringing

Wheeler home for the first run of the game. Larry hit the ball on the seam for a single, but was caught a moment later in trying to purloin second. The next batter up went out on strikes and the inning ended with the Giants one run to the good.

The seventh inning came and passed and not a hit had been made by the Pirates. Then it began to be realized that Joe was out for a no-hit game, and the crowd rooted for him madly.

Joe himself was about the only cool man on the grounds. He measured every man that came to the plate and took his time about pitching to him. Man after man he fanned or made him hit feeble grounders to the infield. And that wonderful control of his forbade any passes. The Pirates did not dare to wait him out. It was a case of strike or be struck out, and so they struck at the ball, but usually struck only the empty air.

That ball! Sometimes it was a wheedling, coaxing ball, that sauntered up to the plate as though just begging to be hit. Again it was a vanishing ball that grew smaller from the time it left Joe's hand until it became a mere pin point as it glinted over the rubber. Still again it was a savage ball that shot over the plate with a rush and a hiss that made the batter jump back. But always it was a deceptive ball, that slipped by, hopped by, loafed by, twisted by, dodged by, and

the Pirate sluggers strained their backs as well as their tempers in trying to hit it.

McRae and Robbie on the bench watched with fascination and delight the work of their king pitcher.

"It's magic, I tell you, John, just magic!" blurted out Robbie, as another victim went out on strikes and threw down his bat in disgust.

"It sure looks like it," grinned McRae. "He has those fellows jumping through the hoops all right. I'm free to say I never saw anything like it."

"He's got the ball trained, I tell you," persisted Robbie, rubbing his hands in jubilation. "It's an educated ball. It does just what Joe tells it to."

Almost uncontrollable excitement prevailed as the Pirates came in for their last inning. Their heaviest sluggers were coming to the bat, and now if ever was the time to do something. They figured that the strain must have told on Joe and that a crack was due.

Their hope grew dimmer, however, when Ralston, after fouling off two, fanned on the third strike. But it revived again when Baskerville rolled an easy one to Larry, that the latter fumbled for a moment and then hurled to first a fraction of a second too late.

There was a roar of glee from the Pirates, and

they began to chatter in the hope of rattling the pitcher. Bemis, the next man up, came to the plate swinging three bats. He discarded two of them and glared at Joe.

"Here's where you meet your finish," he boasted, as he brandished his bat.

Joe merely smiled and put one over. Bemis drove it straight for the box. Joe leaped into the air, caught it in his ungloved hand and shot it like lightning to first, catching Baskerville before he could get back.

It was as pretty a double play as had ever been made on the New York grounds!

CHAPTER XXIV

A CRUSHING BLOW.

THE play had been so swift that the eye could scarcely follow the ball, and it was a few seconds before the majority of the spectators could grasp what had happened.

Then a tremendous shout went up that rolled across the field in increasing volume as the crowds realized that they had seen what would probably never be seen again in a single game. They had seen the New York team break its own record for straight wins, and in addition they had witnessed that rarest of pitching exploits, a no-hit game. Not even a scratch hit had marred Joe's wonderful performance, nor had he given a single base on balls. It was a red-letter day for the Giants and for Joe, and the people who had been there would talk about that game for years.

If any one should have been elated by the marvelous result of that day's work, it was Joe. He had never stood on a higher pinnacle, except perhaps when he had won the last game of the

World Series the preceding year. He was more than ever a hero in the eyes of the baseball public of New York, and within five minutes after the game was over the wires had flashed the news to every city of the country. But despite his natural pride in his achievement and his pleasure in knowing that he had won this critical game for his team, it was a very subdued and worried Joe that hurried to the clubhouse after the game was over. There his mates gathered, in the seventh heaven of delight, and there was a general jubilee, in which McRae and Robson joined.

"We did it, we did it!" cried Robbie, bouncing about like a rubber ball in his excitement. "We broke the record! Twenty-seven games in a row!"

"Where do you get that 'we' stuff, you old porpoise," grinned McRae, poking him jovially in the ribs. "Seems to me that Joe had something to do with it. Put it there, Matson," he went on, extending his hand. "You pitched a game that will go down in baseball history and you saved our winning streak from going up in smoke."

Joe put out his left hand, and McRae looked a little surprised. Then he glanced down at Joe's right hand, and a look of consternation swept over his face.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "What's the matter with your hand? It's swelled to twice its usual size."

"It was that drive of Bemis', I guess," replied Joe. "When I nabbed it, I seemed to feel something crack in the hand. Perhaps, though, it's only strained. It will probably be all right by to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" roared McRae, as all crowded around anxiously. "There'll be no waiting till to-morrow. That hand is worth a half million dollars to the New York club, to say nothing of its worth to yourself. Where's the trainer? Where's the doctor? Jump, some of you fellows, and get them here quick!"

There was a general scurrying around, and in a few minutes both of those men were examining the injured hand with the greatest solicitude. They looked grave when they had finished.

"It's hard to tell just what has happened until the swelling has been reduced," pronounced the doctor, as he busied himself with splints and lotions. "I'm afraid, though, that it's more than a sprain. When it swells as much as that it generally means that a bone has been broken."

There was a general groan.

"That means, does it, that he will be out of the game for the rest of the season?" asked McRae, in notes of despair.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," the doctor hastened to reassure him. "It may be only a trifling fracture, and in that case he will have to be out only

for a short time. But for the next few weeks anyway, he isn't likely to do any more pitching."

"Who's the best specialist in New York?" demanded McRae.

The doctor named a surgeon of national reputation.

"'Phone him to come at once," commanded McRae. "Or, better yet, Joe, you'd better come right with me now. My car's outside and I'll get you up there in fifteen minutes. Every minute counts now."

Joe hurriedly finished dressing, and McRae bundled him into his automobile. It was a speedy machine, and it was to be feared that the traffic laws were not strictly observed as it made its way downtown. But the traffic policemen all knew McRae and Joe, and there was nothing to prevent their getting to their destination in record time.

A telephone call from the clubhouse had already notified the eminent surgeon that the pair were coming, and he was waiting for them. Without a moment's delay, they were ushered into his inner office, where he stripped off the bandages from the hand and made a thorough examination.

"There is a small dislocation," he said when he had finished. "But I think it will yield readily to treatment. It will not be a permanent injury, and in a little while the hand will be as good as ever."

Both drew a sigh of immense relief.

"A little while," repeated McRae. "Just what do you mean by that, Doctor? You know we're fighting for the pennant, and we're depending on this king pitcher of ours more than on any one else to win out. Every day he's out of the race weakens our chances."

"I can't tell that definitely until to-morrow morning," the doctor replied. "But offhand I should say for two or three weeks at least."

"Two or three weeks!" repeated McRae in tones of mingled dismay and relief. "In those two or three weeks we may lose the flag. But thank heaven it's no worse."

After making an appointment for the next morning, McRae drove Joe to his hotel.

"It's bad enough, Joe," he said to him in parting. "I don't know how we're going to spare you while we're in the thick of the fight. But when I think of what it would mean to the team if you were knocked out altogether, I've got no kick coming. We're ahead of the Pittsburghs now, anyway, thanks to your splendid work, and if we can just hold our own till you get back, we'll pull out all right yet."

Joe found Jim waiting for him, full of anxiety and alarm. But his face lighted up when he learned that the injury was not a permanent one.

"It would have been a mighty sight better to have lost the game to-day than to have bought it

at such a price," he said. "But after all, nothing matters as long as your hand is safe. That hand is your fortune."

"To-day was my unlucky day," remarked Joe ruefully, as he looked at his bandaged hand.

"In one sense it was," replied Jim, "but in another it wasn't. To-day you hung up a record. You saved the Giants' winning streak and you pitched a no-hit game!"

CHAPTER XXV

LINING THEM OUT

THE pain in his injured hand was intense that night, and Joe paced the floor for hours before he was able to get to sleep. By morning, however, the hand had yielded to treatment, and the swelling had greatly decreased. At the earliest hour possible Joe, accompanied by Jim, was at the surgeon's office.

The doctor's face expressed his satisfaction, as, after an examination, he rendered his verdict.

"It isn't as bad as I feared," he said while he deftly rebandaged the injured member. "This dislocation is slight and you'll soon be as right as ever. But you've got to take good care of it. It will be some time before you can pitch."

"But how about batting?" asked Joe anxiously. "That isn't a steady strain, as I'd only have to do it three or four times in the course of the game."

"I don't know," replied the doctor with a smile. "I'm not familiar enough with the game to tell

where the strain comes in that case. I can imagine, however, that it would be chiefly in the arm and shoulder. It's possible that you may be able to bat before you can pitch. But I can tell more about that later on, as I see how your hand mends. For the present, you'll have to go slow."

The sporting writers had no reason to complain of the dullness of news for that day's issue. The papers were ringing with the stirring events of the day before. Columns of space were devoted to the story of the game, and there was unstinted praise of Joe for his wonderful exploit.

But mingled with the jubilation was a strain of apprehension. The accident that had befallen the great pitcher was a subject of the keenest anxiety. It was recognized that a great blow had been struck at the Giants' hope for the pennant. To have the greatest twirler of the team put out of the game just in the hottest part of the fight was a disaster that might prove fatal. Pittsburgh stock took a decided upward bound in consequence.

The effect on the Giants themselves, as far as their morale was concerned, was almost certain to be hurtful. The tremendous strain under which they had been, while compiling their twenty-seven consecutive wins, had brought them to a point where a sudden blow like this might make them go to pieces.

As a matter of fact, that is just what did hap-

pen to them that very afternoon. The whole team was depressed and had a case of nerves. They played like a lot of schoolboys, booting the ball, slipping up on easy grounders and muffing flies that ordinarily they could have caught with ease.

The Pittsburghs, on the other hand, played with redoubled skill and courage. Their hopes had been revived by the misfortune that had befallen their most dangerous opponent. Joe was personally popular with all the players of the League, and they were sorry that he was hurt. But that did not prevent them from taking advantage of the chance to make hay while the sun shone.

The game developed into a farce after the third inning, and from that time on it was only a question of the size of the score. When the game ended, the Giant outfielders were leg-weary from chasing hits, and the visitors were equally tired from running bases. The Pittsburghs won by a score of 17 to 3, and the Giants' winning streak came to an end.

But for once the team escaped a roasting from McRae. The team had done wonderful work, and any nine that wins twenty-seven games in succession has a right to lose the twenty-eighth. Besides the break was due, and the manager hoped that with this one bad game out of their systems

the team would pull itself together and start another rally.

For the next week or two, the race see-sawed between the two leading teams. By this time it had become generally recognized that the pennant lay between them. The other contestants had occasional spurts, when great playing for a short period would revive the waning hopes of their admirers, but they soon fell back again in the ruck. It was quite certain that the flag would fly either over Forbes Field or over the Polo Grounds.

In the meantime, Joe's hand was mending rapidly. His superb physical condition helped him greatly, and the doctor was visibly surprised and gratified by the progress of his patient. But it was hard work for Joe to be laid off just at the time that his team needed him most. Still he believed in the proverb "the more haste the less speed," and he tried to be patient, even while he was "chafing at the bit."

About ten days after the accident, the doctor delighted him by telling him that he need not come to see him any more. But he still ordered him to refrain from pitching. As to batting, he said cautiously that Joe could try that out a little at a time. If he found that after easy batting practice his hand did not hurt him, he might be permitted to bat in an actual game.

Joe was quick to avail himself of the permis-

sion. Very cautiously he tried batting out fungo hits. While at first the hand felt a little sore and stiff, this soon passed off. Then Joe had Jim pitch him some easy ones in practice, and found that he could line them out without ill effects. Finally he let Jim put them over at full speed, and was delighted to find that he could lift them into the right field stands and not suffer much of a twinge. At last he was himself again, as far at least as batting was concerned.

His recovery came just in time to be of immense benefit to the team. The men had slumped considerably in batting, though they still held up to their usual form in fielding. But fielding alone cannot win games. Defensive work is all very well, but combined with it must be the offensive work on the part of the batsmen. The best fielding in the world cannot put runs over the plate.

Joe's return put new spirit into the team at once. The batting picked up noticeably, with Joe leading the way. At first he was a little cautious about putting his whole strength into his blow, and for a few days when he was used in emergencies as a pinch hitter, he gathered a crop of singles with an occasional double and triple. But with every successive day he let out a new link, and at length he put his whole strength into his swing. Home runs became again a common feature, and the Giants started in joyously on a new upward climb.

The season was to end this year in the West, and by the time the Giants started on their last swing around the circuit, they had a lead of four games over the Pirates. It was not necessarily a winning lead, but it was very comforting just the same to have those four games as a margin. Still, the Pittsburghs were hanging on gamely, ready to forge to the front on the least sign of weakening shown by their competitors. It was one of the hottest races that had ever been seen in the National League, and there was a chance that it would not be decided until the last day of the season.

"The last lap," remarked Jim, as the team started on its trip. "Here's where we win or lose."

"Here's where we win," corrected Joe.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TIRELESS FOE

THE Giants opened at Chicago, and the results were none too good. The Cubs, who just then were in the midst of a spurt, clawed and bit their way to victory in two games of the four, and the Giants were lucky to break even. As it was, the two games they won were annexed by the terrific batting of Joe, who was hitting like a demon. In the four games he made three home runs, and two of them were lined out when there were men on bases. All pitchers looked alike to him, and he played no favorites. The rest he had had from pitching had made him all the more effective as a batsman.

His fame as a hitter had spread through all the cities of the League, and the Chicago grounds were filled to their capacity during the Giants' visit. Most of the spectators were as eager to see him hit one of his mammoth homers as they were to see the home team win. Cheers greeted

him every time he came to the bat. He was the greatest drawing card that the Giants had or ever had had.

Opinion was divided as to whether he or Kid Rose of the Yankees was the greatest hitter. Each had his partisans. Rose had been longer in the limelight, and those who had made up their minds that he was the greatest hitter that ever lived were reluctant to see their idol replaced by a newcomer. Many confidently predicted that Joe would not last, that his work was only a flash in the pan. Others declared that he did not have to bat against as good pitching in the National League as was shown in the American, and that therefore Rose's work was superior. But as Joe kept on, day in and day out, lacing out tremendous hits that landed in the bleachers and at times sailed over the fence, the doubters grew silent, or joined in the wild applause as Joe jogged around the bases and crossed the plate standing up.

The keenest interest was manifested in the race that the Yankees were making to land the flag in the American League. If they should come out on top, the World Series would be held between New York teams, and Rose and Joe could be seen in action against each other. That would help to settle the question as to which had a right to wear the batting crown of the world. It would be a battle of giants, and it was certain that, if such a

contest took place, there would be delegations to see it from all parts of the country.

McRae was no longer content to use Joe simply as a pinch hitter. He wanted to take full advantage of his marvelous hitting, and so he put him in the regular line-up and played him every day. Wheeler was relegated to the bench and Joe took his place in the field. The manager also changed his batting order, putting Joe fourth in the clean-up position. And again and again his judgment was vindicated by the way Joe cleaned up with homers, sending his comrades in ahead of him.

The day the third Chicago game was played was a very hot one, and Joe and Jim were tired and warm. Jim had pitched that day and won, after a gruelling contest, and Joe had varied his ordinary routine by knocking out two home runs instead of one.

Joe was seated in his hotel room, writing a letter to Mabel. Jim had stepped down to the office to get some stationery, for he had the pleasant task on hand of writing to Clara.

A knock came at the door, and in answer to his call to enter, a bellboy stepped into the room, bearing a pitcher and glasses.

"Here's the lemonade you ordered, boss," he said, as he put his burden on a convenient stand.

"Lemonade?" repeated Joe in some surprise. "I didn't order any."

"Clerk sent me up with it, sir," said the bellboy respectfully. "Said it was for Mr. Matson, room four-seventeen. This is four-seventeen, isn't it?" he asked as he glanced at the number on the door, which he had left open.

"This is four-seventeen, all right, and I'm Mr. Matson," Joe answered. "But I didn't order anything. I'll tell you how it is though," he added, as a thought struck him. "My friend who is sharing the room with me has just gone down to the lobby, and he's probably told the clerk to send it up. That's all right. Leave it there."

"Shall I pour you out a glass, sir?" asked the boy, suiting the action to the word.

"If you like," responded Joe carelessly, taking a quarter out of his pocket as a tip.

The boy thanked him and withdrew, closing the door behind him. Joe finished the paragraph he was writing, and then picked up the glass. He took a sip of it and put it down.

"Pretty bitter," he said to himself. "Not enough sugar. Still it's cooling, and I sure am warm."

Again he lifted the glass to his lips, but just then Jim burst into the room.

"Whom do you think I saw just now?" he demanded.

"Give it up," replied Joe. "But whoever it was, you seem to be all excited about it. Who was it?"

"Fleming!" answered Jim, as he plumped down into a chair.

"Fleming!" repeated Joe with quickened interest. "What's that fellow doing here? I thought he hung out in New York."

"That's what I want to know," replied Jim. "Wherever that fellow is, there's apt to be dirty work brewing. And the frightened look that came into his eyes when he saw me, and the way he hurried past me, made me uneasy. He acted as if he'd been up to something. I don't like the idea of a pal of Braxton being in the same hotel with us."

"I don't care much for it myself," answered Joe. "Still, a hotel is open to anybody, and this is one of the most popular ones in the city. It isn't especially surprising that you should happen to run across him."

"Not surprising perhaps, but unpleasant just the same," responded Jim. "It leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"Well," laughed Joe, "take the bad taste out with a glass of this lemonade you sent up. It isn't very good—it has a bad taste of its own—but it will cool you off."

He raised his glass to his mouth as he spoke. But in an instant Jim was on his feet and knocked the glass from his hand. It fell on the floor and splintered in many pieces.

Joe looked at him in open-eyed amazement, too astonished to speak.

"Don't touch the stuff!" cried Jim. "What do you mean by saying I sent it up?"

"Didn't you?" asked Joe. "The bellboy said he had been told to bring it to me, and as I hadn't ordered it, I jumped to the conclusion that you had."

"Not I!" replied Jim. "But I can guess who did!"

"Who?"

"Fleming."

The two friends looked fixedly at each other.

"Do you mean," asked Joe, after a moment in which surprise and indignation struggled for the mastery, "that that lemonade was doped?"

"Doped or poisoned, I'll bet my life," affirmed Jim. "Let's get to the bottom of this thing. Quick, old man! Perhaps Fleming is still somewhere in the hotel."

"Not a chance," replied Joe, jumping to his feet. "If he's mixed up in this, he's getting away as fast as his legs or a car can carry him. But we'll go down and see what we can learn from the clerk."

They went to the head clerk, whom they knew very well. He was an ardent fan, and his face lighted up as he saw the friends approaching.

"Saw you play to-day, gentlemen," he said.

"Those two home runs of yours were whales, Mr. Matson. And your pitching, Mr. Barclay, was all to the mustard."

"Sorry to beat your Chicago boys, but we needed that game in our business," laughed Joe. "But what I want to see you about just now is a personal matter. Did you get an order from me or from my room to send up any lemonade?"

The clerk looked surprised.

"No," he replied. "I didn't get any such request. Wait a moment until I see the telephone operator."

He consulted the girl at the telephone, and was back in a moment. "No message of any kind came from your room to-night," he announced.

"But one of your bellboys brought it up," persisted Joe.

"Which one of them was it?" asked the clerk, pointing to a group of them lounging about.

"None of them," responded Joe, as he ran his eye over them.

CHAPTER XXVII

CHAMPIONS OF THE LEAGUE

“THERE are three more of the bellboys doing various errands about the hotel,” replied the clerk. “If you gentlemen will wait around they’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“All right, we’ll wait,” said Joe.

Before long, all the bellboys were back, and Joe had had a good look at the entire staff. Not one resembled the boy who had come to his room.

“I can’t understand it,” mused the clerk, to whom the boys had been careful not to impart their suspicions. “It must have been sent in by somebody from the outside. It’s certain that it wasn’t sent up from here.”

“Oh, well,” said Joe carelessly, “it doesn’t matter. I just wanted to find out, so that I could thank the one who did it. Sorry to have troubled you.”

They strolled off indifferently and returned to their room.

“‘Thank’ is good,” said Jim, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"I'll thank him all right," replied Joe grimly. "In fact I'll thank him so warmly that it will stagger him."

"May I be there to see!" replied Jim gruffly. "I can figure out the whole thing now. Fleming had had that lemonade doped and it was meant to put you out of business. It was easy to find out what hotel you were stopping at, as that's been in all the papers. Then it was a simple thing to glance over the register and get the number of your room. He's either got a bellboy from some other hotel or dressed up somebody in a bellboy's uniform. He's probably bribed him well, and it's been all the easier because he didn't have to let on to the boy that there was anything crooked about it. Told him perhaps that he was just playing a little joke on a friend or something like that. There's the whole story."

"I guess that's about right," agreed Joe. "Gee, Jim, it's mighty lucky that you knocked that glass out of my hand. I had noticed that it tasted rather bitter, but put that down to too little sugar."

"Let's send some of the stuff to a chemist and have it analyzed," suggested Jim.

"No," objected Joe, "that wouldn't do any good. The thing would be apt to get into the papers, and that's the very thing we mustn't let happen for the sake of the folks at home. We

know enough about the stuff to be sure that it was doctored in some way. Everything about the incident tells of crookedness. Fleming was probably the master hand, although he may have simply been the tool of Braxton. Those fellows are running up a heavy account, and some day I hope we'll get the goods on them. We'll just dump the stuff out so that nobody else will be injured. Then we'll lay low but keep our eyes open. It's all that we can do."

"Gee, that was one 'dandy homer, Joe," said the catcher some time later.

"Best ever," added the first baseman.

"Oh, I don't know," answered the young ball player modestly. "I think I have done better. But it was great to carry it along to eleven innings," he added, with a smile.

"That tenth had me almost going," said the shortstop. "We came close to spilling the beans," and he shook his head seriously.

"Well, 'all's well that ends well,' as Socrates said to General Grant," and Joe grinned.

From Chicago the Giants jumped to St. Louis, where, despite the stiffest kind of resistance, they took three games out of four. They were not quite as successful in Cincinnati, where the best they could get was an even break. The Reds saw a chance to come in third, in which case they would have a share in the World Series money, and they

were showing the best ball that they had played all season. The Giants had all they could do to nose them out in the last game, which went to eleven innings and was only won by a home run by Joe in the wind-up.

Seven games out of twelve for a team on the road was not bad, but it would have been worse if the Pirates, in the meantime, had not also had a rocky road to travel. The Brooklyns had helped their friends across the bridge by taking the Pittsburghs into camp to the tune of three games out of four and the Bostons had broken even. With the Phillies, however, the Pirates had made a clean sweep of the four games. So when the Giants faced their most formidable foes, they still had the lead of four games with which they had begun their Western trip.

This, of course, gave the Giants the edge on their rivals. The Pittsburghs would have to win the whole four games to draw up on even terms with the leaders. In that case a deciding game would be necessary to break the tie. On the other hand all the Giants had to do was to win one game of the four and they would have the championship cinched. And that they would do at least that seemed almost a certainty.

But nothing is certain in baseball, as soon became evident. Perhaps it was overconfidence or a sense of already being on easy street that caused

the Giants to lose the first game. That, however, could not be said of the second, when the Giants "played their heads off," Jim said, and yet could not win against the classy pitching and stonewall defense put up by the Smoky City team. Things were beginning to look serious for the Giants, and some of their confidence was vanishing.

Still more serious did they become when the third game went into the Pirates' basket. Jim pitched in that game and twirled wonderful ball, but his support was ragged, and several Pirate blows that ought to have been outs were registered ultimately as runs. They were unearned runs, but they counted in the final score as much as though they had been due to the team's hitting. The Giants were long-faced and gloomy.

McRae was clearly worried. If the next game were lost, the leaders would be tied, and the Pirates would still have a chance to win. It would be a bitter pill to swallow if the Giants lost the flag just when it had seemed that all was over except the shouting.

Moreover, the manager was in a quandary. All his first string pitchers had been beaten. His best one in active service at the present time, Jim, had pitched that day and it would not do to ask him to go into the box again to-morrow. In his desperation he turned to Joe.

"Joe," he said, "we're up against it unless you

can help us out. How is your hand feeling? Would you dare to take a chance with it?"

"I think it's all right now, or nearly so," replied Joe. "I've been trying it out in practice right along, and it seems to me it's about as good as ever. I was putting them over to Mylert yesterday, and he told me he couldn't see any difference between them and those I threw before I was hurt. The only thing I'm a little skittish about is my fadeaway. That gives me a little twinge when I try it. But I guess I can leave that out and still pull through."

"That's good!" ejaculated McRae, with great relief. "Go in then, old boy, and show these pesky Pirates where they get off. We simply must win this game."

There was a startled murmur among the spectators who thronged Forbes Field that afternoon when they saw Joe go into the box. They had been gloating over the supposition that McRae would have to use again one of the pitchers whom the Pirates had already beaten in that series, and the way their pets were going, they looked for a sure victory. Now they saw the man who had always baffled the Pittsburghs again take up the pitcher's burden, and their faces took on a look of apprehension.

The Pirate players too shared in that apprehension. They had a profound respect for Joe's

ability, and had always had a sinking of the heart when they saw him draw on his glove. Still, they comforted themselves with the hope that his long layoff had hurt his effectiveness, and they braced to give him the battle of his life.

Joe himself felt a thrill of exultation when he stepped on the mound. That was his throne. There he had won the laurels that crowned him as the greatest pitcher of his League. Now he was back again, back to buoy up the spirit of his team, back to justify the confidence of his manager, back to uphold his fame, back to bring the championship of the National League once more to New York.

He still carried in his pocket Mabel's glove, that he had come to regard as his mascot. He touched it now. Then he wound up for the first pitch and split the plate for a strike.

It was an auspicious beginning of one of the greatest games he had ever pitched in his whole career. The Pirates simply did not have a chance. All through the game they were swinging wildly at a ball that seemed to be bewitched, a ball that dodged their bats and appeared to be laughing at them. Angered and bewildered, they tried every device to avoid impending defeat. They bunted, they put in pinch hitters, they called the umpire's attention to Joe's delivery in the hope of rattling him, they tried to get hit with the ball.

Through it all, Joe kept on smiling and mowing them down. Only three men got to first. Not one got to second. Thirteen men went out on strikes. And then, to cap the climax, Joe sent a screaming homer into the right field bleachers, sending in two men ahead of him.

The final score was 8 to 0. The Giants had won the championship of the National League. Now they were to battle for the championship of the world!

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WORLD SERIES

IT was a happy team of Giants that left Pittsburgh that night on the sleeper for New York. The season's strain was over. The coveted flag was theirs. They had fought their way through many discouragements, had stood the gaff, and now they were at the top of their League, with none to contest their title as champions.

"Some victory, eh, Joe?" remarked Jim to his chum.

"Right, Jim," was the ready reply.

To be sure a great battle loomed up ahead of them, but they welcomed that with eagerness. It meant thousands of dollars to every member of the team, win or lose. But they had no thought of losing. The return of their king pitcher to the box that afternoon, and the proof that he was in magnificent form, had filled them chock full of confidence.

And they were doubly glad that the Yankees were to be their opponents. That had been settled

three days before, when the American League season had closed with the Yankees just nosing out the Clevelands at the finish. It was settled that every game of the World Series would be played in New York.

This meant that there would be no long, tiresome, overnight journeys between cities. But it meant more than that. It meant that the question would now be settled once for all as to which of the New York teams was the better.

This had been a mooted question for a good many years past. Each team had its warm friends and admirers, who were ready to back it through thick and thin. The Giants, of course, had been established longer, and had gained a strong place in the affections of the metropolis. Their games, as a usual thing, drew many more spectators than those played by their rivals. But of late the acquisition of Kid Rose by the Yankees had drawn the greater attention to that team, and the Giants had been cast in the shade. They were not used to this and did not relish it. They knew the Yankees were a strong team, but at the same time they believed that they could take their measure if it ever came to a showdown. Now that showdown was at hand, and the Giants were glad of it.

The public, too, were eager to have the question of supremacy settled. The metropolis was fairly seething with excitement over the series, and the

hotels already were filling up with visitors from as far off as the Pacific Coast. Not only columns but whole pages of the newspapers were filled with comments and prophecies respecting the chances of the respective teams.

More than anything else in the public mind was the coming duel between Kid Rose and Joe Mattson as home run hitters. Which would make the longer hits? Which would make the more home runs? These were the questions that were on the lips of the fans wherever two or more of them met. And the sporting pages of the daily newspapers were full of it.

The series this year was to consist of nine games if so many should be necessary. The team that first won five games would be the champions of the world. The members of the teams were to share in the money taken in at the first five games played, so that there would be no inducement to spin out the series. After certain percentages had been deducted sixty per cent was to go to the winners and forty per cent to the losers. The outlook was that each member of the winning team would get about five thousand dollars and each member of the losing team between three and four thousand, a difference great enough to make each player do his best, apart from his loyalty to his team.

Reggie had come up from Goldsboro, bringing

Mabel with him, a charge of which Joe promptly relieved him. She seemed to Joe more distractingly beautiful than ever, and his heart thumped as he realized that in less than a month she would be his own. That had been arranged in their correspondence. The wedding would take place in Mabel's home in Goldsboro, and after their honeymoon they were to go to Riverside, to witness the marriage of Jim and Clara. The latter had hoped to come on to see the World Series, but Mrs. Matson was not well enough to come along, and Clara did not want to leave her. So poor Jim had to exercise patience and not be too envious of the almost delirious happiness of Joe and Mabel at being together.

A more exciting World Series than that which now began between the Giants and Yankees had never been known in the history of the game. Both teams were out for blood. Every man was on his toes, and the excited spectators were roused almost to madness by the almost miraculous stops and throws pulled off by the fielders. From the start it was evident that the nines were very evenly balanced, and that whichever finally won would in all probability do so by the narrowest kind of margin.

Victory seesawed between the teams. Joe pitched the first game, and the Giants won by 3 to 1. The Yankees took the second by 5 to 2. Jim.

held them down in the third to two runs, while the Giants accumulated six. The Yankees made it "fifty-fifty" by galloping away with the fourth game in a free hitting contest, of which Markwith was the victim, the final score being 9 to 5. The Giants again assumed the lead by copping the fifth by 4 to 0, Joe decorating his opponents with a necklace of goose eggs. They repeated on the following day, and with only one more game needed to make the five, it looked as though they would be certain winners. But the Yankees were not yet through, and they came back strong on the two succeeding days and evened up the score. Each had won four games. The ninth and final game would determine which team was to be the champions of the world.

In these contests, Joe had batted like a fiend. McRae had played him in every game, putting him in the outfield on the days that he was not scheduled to pitch. In the eight games, Joe had made six circuit clouts, in addition to four three-baggers, three two-base hits, and some singles. He was simply killing the ball.

Kid Rose also had done sterling work, and had rapped out five homers, besides a number of hits for a lesser number of bags. But Baseball Joe so far had outclassed him, both in the number and the length of his hits. There was no stopping him. High or low, incurve or outcurve, they were all

the same to him. That eagle eye of his located the course of the ball unerringly, and when the ash connected with the ball that ball was slated for a ride.

There was no mistake about it. Joe had arrived. The batting crown was his. He had long since been recognized as the king of pitchers. Now he was hailed by acclamation as the greatest hitter in the game!

CHAPTER XXIX

THE GAME OF HIS LIFE

FOR the ninth and deciding game, McRae had selected Joe to pitch.

"I don't need to tell you, Joe, how much depends on this game," McRae said soberly, as the two came out of the clubhouse and walked across the field towards the grandstand, which was crowded to suffocation. "You know it as well as I do. I'm just counting on you, my boy. You've never failed me yet in a pinch. You won't fail me now."

"Trust me, Mac," replied Joe. "I'll do my best to win out."

Hudson, the manager of the Yankees, was also pinning his faith on the leader of his pitching staff, Phil Hays. He was a master of the underhand delivery, and had already captured for the Yankees the two games of the series in which he had pitched. In both games he had sorely puzzled the Giants, for there was no pitcher in the National League who used that delivery, and they

had found it almost impossible to gauge it. He also had a crossfire, that he used at times with telling effect. He had not yet matched his pitching strength against Joe's, and the crowd was all agog with curiosity to see them battle against each other.

Jim had been a little later than Joe in slipping into his uniform, and was still in the clubhouse, after his friend had gone out on the field, when Reggie came rushing in, panting and out of breath.

"Where's Joe?" he asked, looking wildly around.

"He's just gone out to practice," answered Jim. "Why, what's the matter, Reggie?"

"I've got to get Joe," Reggie panted, making a dash for the door.

But Jim caught his arm.

"Look here, Reggie," he said, holding to him tightly. "Joe mustn't be upset. I can see that something's happened. Tell me what it is, and I'll see about letting Joe know."

"It's M-Mabel!" answered Reggie, stammering in his excitement. "She's disappeared."

"Disappeared!" echoed Jim, in bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"Just that," answered Reggie. "She went out this morning to call on a friend, but said she'd get back to go with me to the game. I got anxious when she didn't come, and called up her friend,

who said she hadn't seen her. Just then a messenger boy brought me this," and he handed over a typewritten, unsigned note, which read:

"Miss Varley is in safe hands. If Matson loses his game to-day she will be returned this evening. If he doesn't, it will cost \$25,000 to get her back. Personal in papers to-morrow, signed T. Z., will give exact directions for carrying on further negotiations."

"Now you see why I've got to see Joe right away," said Reggie in frenzied impatience, snatching the note from Jim's hands.

"You mustn't!" ejaculated Jim, barring the way. "Don't you see that that's just what the rascals want you to do? You'd just be playing their game. They want to get Joe so frightened and upset that he can't pitch. It's the scheme of some gamblers who have bet on the Yanks to win. They want to make sure that they will win, and so they want to bribe or frighten Joe into losing. But probably if he did, they'd demand the ransom money just the same. We'll have to keep it from Joe until the game is over. Nothing will be lost by that. I'll give McRae a tip and he'll let me off. Then you and I will get busy and do all that we can for the next two hours. If we turn nothing up, we'll be back here when the game ends and tell Joe all

about it. Wait here a minute till I see McRae, and then we'll get on the job."

In five minutes he was back with the required permission, and as soon as he had got into his street clothes he hailed a taxicab, and he and Reggie jumped in and were off.

When the bell rang for the game to begin, the Giants took the field, and Milton, the big center-fielder of the Yankees, came to the plate. Joe wound a high fast one about his neck, at which he refused to bite. The next one split the rubber, and Milton swung savagely at it and missed. The next was a called strike. On the following ball, he rolled an easy grounder to Burkett at first, who made the put out unassisted. The next man, Pender, Joe put out on strikes in jig time. Then the mighty Kid Rose strode to the bat.

He grinned at Joe and Joe grinned back. They were both good fellows, and each thoroughly respected the other. There was no bitterness in their rivalry.

"Now little ball, come to papa!" sang out Rose.

"Here he comes!" laughed Joe. "Take a look at baby."

The ball whizzed over the plate, and Rose missed it by an inch. The next he fouled off, as he did the following one. Then Joe tried a fade-away, and Rose fell for it, swinging himself half-way round with the force of his blow.

"You're out!" cried the umpire, and the Giant supporters in the stands broke out in cheers. It was not often that Rose struck out, and the feat was appreciated.

In the Giants' half, Hays set them down in one, two, three order. Curry flied to Russell in right, Iredell went out by the strike route, while Burkett's grounder to Pender at short was whipped smartly down to first.

The Yankees were easy victims in the second. Russell fanned, Walsh lifted a twisting foul, on which Mylert made a superb catch close to the Giants' dugout and Mullen hit a grounder between first and the box, which Joe captured and fielded to Burkett in plenty of time.

Joe was first up in the Giants' half, and had to doff his cap in response to the cheers which greeted him as he came to the plate.

Hays sized him up carefully and did not like his looks. The first ball he threw him was so wide that Banks, the catcher, had to reach far out to nab it with one hand.

That might have been lack of control on Hays' part, but when a second followed, that came nowhere in the range of Joe's bat, the crowd jumped to the conclusion that he was deliberately trying to pass him, and a storm of protests rained down on the diamond.

"You're a game sport—not!"

“Let Baseball Joe hit the ball!”

“Yellow streak!”

“Matson took a chance with Rose. Why don't you take a chance with Matson?”

“Where's your sand?”

Whether Hays was stung by these jibes or not, the next ball curved over the plate and just above the knee. There was a ringing crack, and the ball sailed aloft in the direction of the bleachers with home run written all over it. There was no need of hurrying, and Joe simply trotted around the bases, while pandemonium reigned in the stands and bleachers.

CHAPTER XXX

CHAMPIONS OF THE WORLD

WHEELER went out on a fly to Milton, Willis fanned, and Larry closed the inning with a pop up to second. But the Giants had scored first blood, and in such a close game as this promised to be, that run stood out like a lighthouse.

In the third, McCarthy fell victim to Joe's curves and went out on strikes. Banks was lucky and got to first on a grasser to Iredell that took a wicked bound just as the shortstop was all set to receive it and jumped into left. He was nipped a minute later, when Joe saw out of the corner of his eye that he was taking too long a lead off first and made a lightning throw to Burkett. Hays, after fouling off two, struck out on a mean drop, and the inning ended without damage.

Hays put one over for Denton that the latter picketed for a dandy grasser between third and short. Rose at left was slow in retrieving the ball, and Denton by fleet running and a hook slide reached the middle station. Here, however, he

was caught napping. Then Hays braced and set the next two players down on strikes. It was a deft exhibition of "getting out of a hole," and deserved the generous applause that it received.

In the Yankees' half of the fourth, Milton sent one to Willis at third that the latter stopped neatly but threw to first too wide, the ball almost missing Burkett's fingers as he reached for it. Pender knocked a grounder to Larry, but the latter hesitated a moment as to whether to make the play at first or second, and when he finally chose second, Milton had reached that bag, and both men were safe. Then Rose came to the bat, with the Yankee partisans shouting wildly for a homer:

Joe fooled him twice, but Rose caught the third one and poled a hit to right. Wheeler and Denton both raced for it, and the latter by a herculean effort just managed to get under it. In the meantime, Milton had started forward, and Pender too was on his way. Quick as a flash, Denton straightened up and sent the ball on a line to first. Pender had turned and was running back, but was an easy out. Burkett shot the ball to Larry, putting out Milton, who was scrambling back to second. It was a superb triple play and the crowd went crazy.

Iredell started the Giants' fourth with a liner to McCarthy, that settled comfortably in the third

baseman's glove. Burkett lammed a single into right. Joe walloped a shrieking three-bagger between right and center, that brought Burkett galloping to the plate for the second run of the game. Wheeler was ordered to sacrifice, but his attempted bunt resulted in a little fly to Hays, and Joe was held on third. Hays turned on steam and struck Willis out.

The fifth inning passed without scoring by either side. Both Joe and Hays were pitching magnificent ball, and the crowds cheered each in turn lustily.

The first real hit that Joe yielded came in the sixth, when after McCarthy had struck out, Banks lined a beauty into right between first and second. It did no harm, however, for Joe tightened up immediately and made Hays and Milton hit at empty air.

The Giants in their half went the Yankees one better in the matter of hits, and yet could not score. Curry sent a twister over second that Mullen could not get under. Iredell followed with a slow roller down the third base line, that McCarthy could not reach in time to field. A moment later, however, Curry was caught napping at second, and Burkett hit into a snappy double play, retiring the side.

In the seventh, the Yankees broke the ice. Pender got a life, when his high fly to third was muffed by Willis. Kid Rose came to the bat.

"Put it over, Joe, and see me lose it," he called. "I was robbed last time."

"That's nothing, Kid," chaffed Joe. "You'll be killed this time."

The first ball, which completely baffled the most dangerous slugger of the American League, seemed to bear out this prediction. On the second, however, Rose sent a neat hit to right that was good for two bases and brought Pender over the plate, amid the thunderous roars of the Yankee supporters. Russell tapped a little one in front of the plate, that Joe got in time to put him out at first, but not to head Rose off at third. Walsh went out on strikes. Mullen rolled one to Burkett, and Joe ran over to cover the bag, but Burkett's throw hit the dirt and Rose came over the plate, tying the score. McCarthy fanned, and the inning was over. One hit, sandwiched in with errors, had knocked the Giants' lead into a cocked hat and tied up the game.

Not for long, however. Joe was the first man up, and came to the plate with blood in his eye. The first two offerings he let go by. The third was to his liking. There was an explosion like the crack of a gun and the ball started on its journey.

That journey was destined to be talked about for years to come. It was the longest hit that ever had been made on the Polo Grounds. On it went

over right field, over the bleachers and over the fence, clearing it at a height of fifty feet.

In the wild roar that went up as Joe loped around the bases, even the Yankee supporters joined. It was an occasion that rose above partisanship, an outstanding event in the history of sport. The spectators cheered until they were hoarse, and it was a minute or two before play could be resumed.

The rest of the inning was short and sweet. Wheeler, Willis and Larry went out in order, the first two on strikes and the latter on a grounder fielded by Mullen.

The eighth was on the same snappy order. Joe was determined to maintain his advantage, and was invincible. Banks grounded to the box, and Joe tossed him out. Hays fanned for the second time and Milton followed suit.

Hays, too, was going strong, and the Giant batsmen went down before him like a row of ten-pins. Denton made three futile attempts and threw down his bat in disgust. Mylert cut three successive swaths in the atmosphere and went back to the bench, while Curry fouled out to Banks.

In the ninth, the Yankees again sewed it up. Pender got to first, when Larry was slow in fielding his grounder. The mighty Rose came up amid frantic cheering. But Joe summoned all his

cunning, and for the second time that day struck him out, while the crowd cheered his sportsmanship in not passing him to first. Russell popped up an infield fly that Willis and Iredell ran for but collided, the ball dropping between them. In the scramble that ensued, Pender reached third and Russell made second. Iredell was still a little shaken by the collision, and fumbled the easy grounder of Walsh that ought to have resulted in an out at the plate, Walsh reaching first in safety. In consequence Pender scored, and again the game was tied at 3 to 3. A single now would have brought in another run, but Joe by a quick throw caught Walsh asleep at first and struck out Mullen, thus ending the inning.

With the frenzied adjurations of McRae and Robbie in their ears, the Giants came to the bat for the last half of the ninth. Iredell made a mighty effort, but came back to the bench after three fruitless swings at Hays' benders. Burkett sent up a towering skyscraper that was gathered in after a long run by Milton in center.

On Joe now rested the Giants' hopes. Twice that day he had poled out homers, and once he had ripped out a three-bagger. Could he repeat?

Hays was determined that he shouldn't have a chance. Amid the jeers and taunts of the crowd, he deliberately sent three balls wide of the plate. In attempting to do the same with the fourth,

however, he sent it a trifle too close. Joe caught it on the end of his bat.

How that ball traveled! Almost on a line it whistled through the air in the direction of the right field bleachers. On and on went that terrific, screeching liner straight into the crowd in the bleachers who scrambled frantically to get out of its path.

Round the bases went Joe, amid shouts and yells that were deafening. Down on the home plate he came with both feet. The game was won, the series was over and the Giants were the champions of the world!

Like a deer Joe made for the clubhouse, to escape the crowds that came swarming over the field. He reached it just as a man was being carried inside.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Any one hurt?"

"Only a glancing blow," remarked the club doctor, who had been looking the man over. "He's dazed, but he'll come to his senses soon."

Joe bent over to look at him and started back in surprise.

"Why, I know that man!" he exclaimed. "His name's Fleming!"

"It's Fleming all right," said Jim's voice beside him. "And he's got just what was coming to him."

Joe looked up and saw Jim and Reggie. They were grave and worried, and Joe's sixth sense told him that something was wrong.

"What's happened?" he asked in alarm. "And where is Mabel? What kept her from the game? Don't stand there dumb! Tell me, quick!"

"Now, Joe——" began Jim soothingly, but was interrupted by the injured man who opened his eyes, looked wildly around and struggled to a sitting posture. His eyes dilated with fright when he saw Joe and Jim.

"I didn't do it!" he half screamed. "I didn't kidnap her! It was Braxton. He——"

Jim interposed.

"Clear a space here," he commanded. "This is a private matter for Joe and me. Now, Fleming," he went on in short, menacing words that cut like a knife, "tell me this instant where Miss Varley is. You know. Tell me. Quick! Don't lie, or I'll tear your tongue out by the roots."

Before the blazing fury in his eyes Fleming quailed.

"She's at Inwood," he muttered. "She's safe enough. She's——"

"Reggie," commanded Jim, "jump into the car and take the wheel. Joe, help me to get this man into the car. Don't talk. I'll explain as we go along. Doyle," he continued, turning to a police lieutenant who was a warm admirer of the boys

and who happened to be standing near, "come along with us if you don't mind. It may be a case for you."

"Sure thing," replied Doyle. "I'm with you."

They half dragged, half carried, Fleming to the car, and Reggie put on speed. The lieutenant sat in front with him, and his uniform prevented any question on the part of the traffic policemen. Fleming, pale and apprehensive, was thrust into a corner of the tonneau, while Jim explained the situation to Joe, who was boiling with rage.

The headlong speed at which Reggie drove soon brought them to the vicinity of Inwood, and following the faltering directions of Fleming, they drew up before a little house that was a block away from any of its neighbors.

They tiptoed up the steps, Joe having his hand so tightly on Fleming's collar that his knuckles ground into his neck.

"You know what you've got to do, Fleming," he whispered. "If you don't do it——"

His grip tightened and his fist clenched.

Trembling, Fleming opened the front door with his latchkey, and the party went softly through the hall. They stopped in front of a door from behind which a man was heard talking.

"I'm sorry to have to incommode you, Miss Varley," he was saying in suave polished tones that the boys recognized at once as Braxton's.

“But unfortunately it is necessary to the success of my plans. You can’t complain that we haven’t treated you with perfect respect outside of the little violence we had to use to get you into the car.”

There was no reply, but the party could hear the sound of sobbing.

“Knock,” whispered Joe, emphasizing the command by a twist of Fleming’s collar.

Fleming knocked.

“Who’s there?” came from within.

“It’s Fleming,” was the weak answer. “Open up.”

The door opened and the party went in with a rush.

There was a cry of joy from Mabel and a startled exclamation from Braxton. He looked toward the door, but the burly policeman had closed it and stood with his back against it. The next instant Joe had smashed Braxton straight between the eyes and the rascal measured his length on the floor. An instant more, and Mabel was in Joe’s arms, sobbing her heart out against his breast.

For a few moments the reunited ones were dead to the world around them. When at last they had come to their senses, Joe, with a final caress, relinquished Mabel to Reggie’s care.

“You’d better go out to the car, ‘dearest,” he

said to her. "I'll be with you soon. I've got a little business to attend to here."

The brother and sister went out, and Joe turned to the rest of the party. Braxton had been yanked to his feet by Jim and jammed down hard into a chair, where he sat glowering with rage and fear. Doyle stood guard over Fleming, who presented a miserable picture of abjectness.

"Shall I take them in charge, Mr. Matson?" asked the police lieutenant. "You seem to have a clear case against them. They ought to get ten years at least."

The fear in the rascals' faces deepened.

"No," answered Joe thoughtfully. "I don't want any scandal and I don't believe I'll make a charge. At least, not yet. Jim, can you skirmish around and find pen and ink?"

In a minute or two Jim had found them.

"Now, you contemptible skunks," began Joe, "listen to me. I'm going to get a written confession from you of this whole business. Put down, Jim, that matter of the anonymous letter. Don't try to lie out of it, you scoundrel," he said, as Braxton started to protest. "Put down, too, that hiring of the auto bandits to cripple me." Here Braxton gave a violent start. "Put down that attempt to dope me in Chicago. That hits you on the raw, doesn't it, Fleming?" he added, as the latter cringed still lower in his seat. "We'll pass

over the matter of hiring Bugs Hartley to do me up in St. Louis, for he may have done that on his own account. Now add this kidnaping incident and the record will be complete."

Jim wrote rapidly and soon had the document ready.

"Now we'll ask these gentlemen to sign," said Joe, with exaggerated politeness.

"I won't sign," snarled Braxton, livid with rage.

"Oh, you won't?" said Joe. "All right, Lieutenant——"

"I'll sign," said Braxton hastily.

Both he and Fleming signed, and Joe put the document carefully into his pocket.

"Now," he said, "I have you rascals on the hip. Dare to make one other move against me as long as you live, and I'll have you clapped into jail so quickly it will make your heads swim. I'll put you where the dogs won't bite you."

Both Braxton and Fleming rose to their feet.

"Where are you going?" asked Joe, in apparent surprise.

"You're through with us, aren't you?" growled Braxton.

Joe laughed outright.

"Oh, dear no," he said, as he rose to his feet. "There's just one little thing to attend to yet. I'm going to thrash you within an inch of your life."

Braxton made a dash for the door, but Joe caught him a clip on the jaw that sent him staggering back into a corner.

"Now Jim," said Joe, "suppose you take that little rat out," pointing to Fleming, "and drop him somewhere. He got his dose when the ball knocked him out in the bleachers, and that perhaps will be enough for him. Lieutenant," he went on, turning to Doyle, "you're a policeman, and might feel called on to stop any scene of violence. I feel it in my bones that there's going to be a little violence here—just a little. Would you mind stepping outside and seeing whether the car is all right?"

"Sure," replied Doyle, with a grin and a wink.

"Now, you cur," said Joe, as he turned to Braxton, "take off your coat. It's a long account I have to settle with you, and I'm going to give you the licking of your life."

There was no way out, and Braxton took off his coat and closed in. He was a big man and fought with the desperation of a cornered rat. He got in one or two wild blows that did no damage. Joe smashed him right and left, knocked him down and lifted him to his feet to knock him down again, until Braxton, beaten to a finish, refused to get up, and lay in a heap in a corner, fairly sobbing with rage and pain and shame.

"Just one little bit of news, Braxton," said Joe,

as he turned to leave. "You've lost your bets. The Giants won!"

He ran lightly down the steps and jumped into the car, where Mabel snuggled up to him.

"What kept you so long, Joe?" she asked anxiously.

"Just settling an account, honey," he replied, as he drew her closer. "It was a long one and took some time."

"An account? What do you mean?" the girl asked, and then added suddenly: "Oh, Joe, you are all—all mussed up!"

"Am I, dear? Well, if I am you ought to see the other fellow, that's all."

"It was a—a fight?" she faltered.

"Hardly that, Mabel. Braxton had it coming to him—and I gave it to him with interest. But let us forget it. It's over now, and all I want to think about is—you!" And he held her closer than ever.

A few weeks later the wedding march was played in Mabel's home, and she and Joe joined hands for life. Clara was bridesmaid and Jim was best man. Mr. and Mrs. Matson, the latter greatly improved in health, were present. It was a glorious occasion, and all of them, the bride and groom especially, were happy beyond words.

"I'm quite a royal personage," said Mabel, as

the happy pair, amid a shower of rice, started off on their honeymoon. "To think of poor little me marrying the king of pitchers and king of batters."

"As Reggie would say, you're 'spoofing' me," he laughed. "At any rate, I'm luckier than most kings. I've picked a perfect queen." And Baseball Joe smiled broadly.

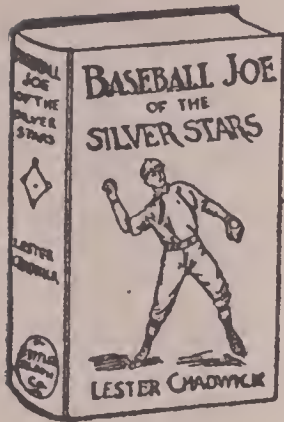
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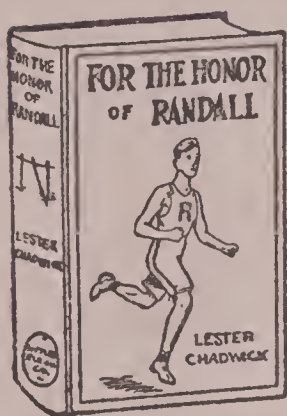
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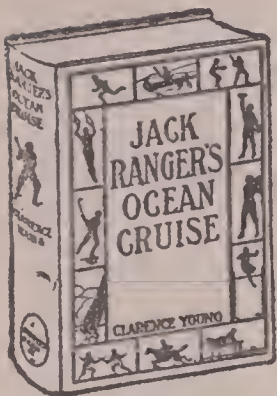
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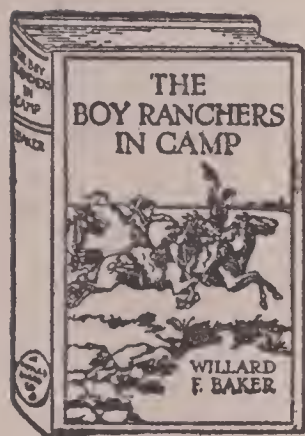
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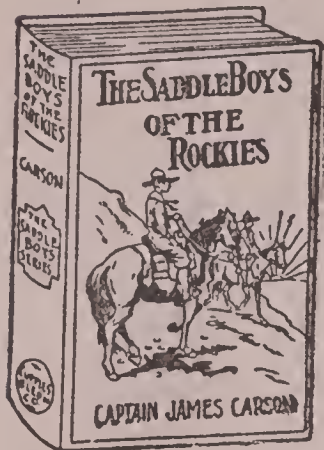
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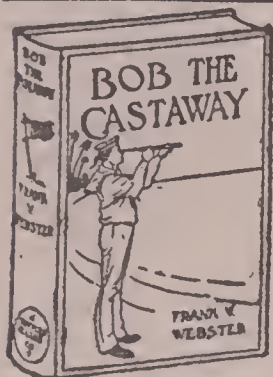
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